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By J. EDWARD LEITHEAD

First November Number

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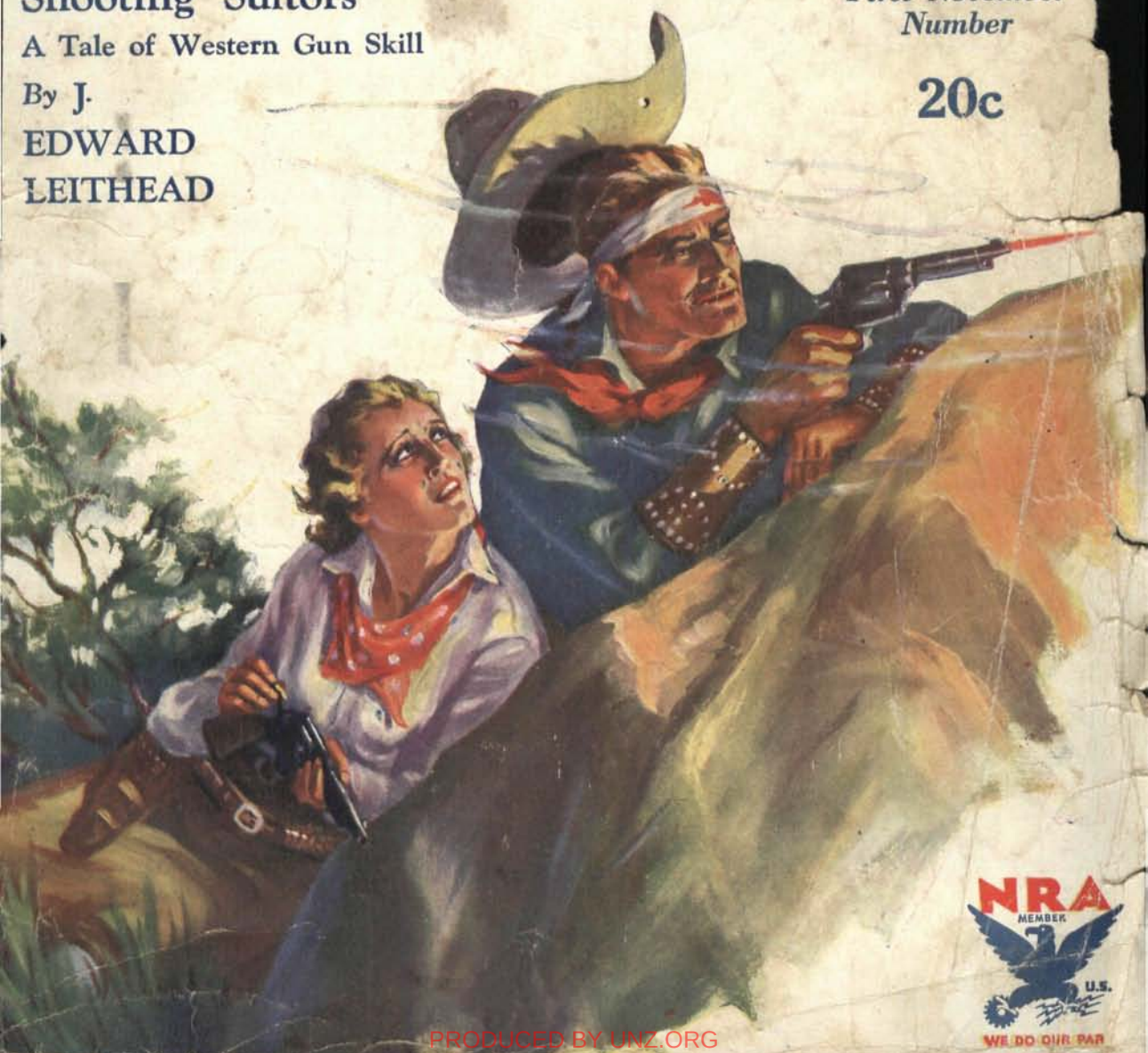

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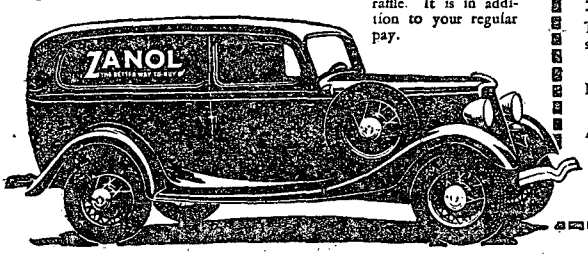

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FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

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In the Second November Issue

which goes on sale October 27

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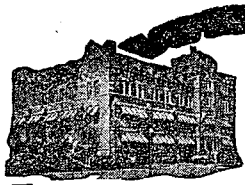

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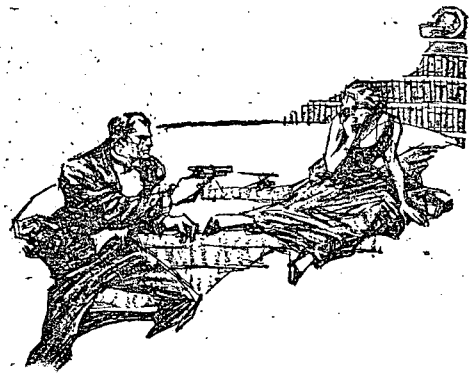

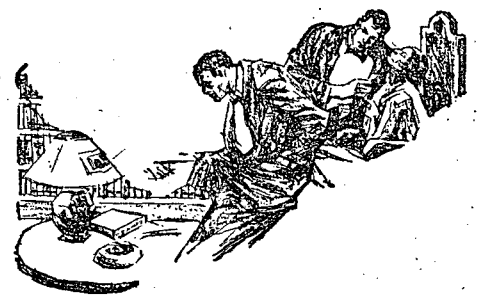

"Welch fired from the pocket of his dinner jacket . . ."

"McFee said: 'Quit that, Joe.' Monty Welch must have heard him first: He spun on his heel, white violence bursting through his professional calm. As McFee said 'Joe,' Welch fired from the pocket of his dinner jacket. He fired again, lurching toward McFee. The latter aimed and let go. Welch screamed and went down, threshed about, buried his face in the carpet.

"Metz stood erect, his hands at his sides. McFee went towards him. Metz did not move or speak. His forehead gleamed; his lips twitched. McFee took a long stride, a short one, and hit Metz a terrific blow on the mouth. It made a crunching sound, and Metz hit the carpet. McFee pulled the adhesive tape from Irene Mayo's lips."

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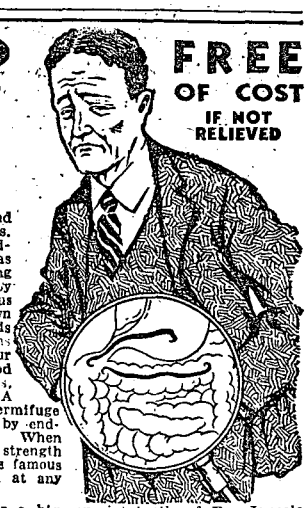

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Our Trophy Cups

HERE they are—the silver trophy cups which Ranch Romances has presented to the winners of the Cowboy and Cowgirl Trick and Fancy Riding Contest at the World's Fair Rodeo at Chicago. These are the cups we told you about previously, in the Second September Number.

The Rodeo was a great show, made up entirely of champions from various rodeos all over the West—Pendleton, Cheyenne, Ellensburg, and many others. It was a pleasure to watch these Western men and girls, for they certainly do know their stuff!

In the next issue we shall announce the names and print photographs of the winners, so that all of you may see these marvelous riders of whom Ranch Romances is so proud.

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Eve was very fair to look upon.

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Shooting Suitors

By J. Edward Leithead

They were three stalwart young cowboys who had been friends for years, and now they all worshiped the same lovely girl. Could a dastardly range-hog, plotting evil, turn their rivalry to his own fell purposes?

CHAPTER I

Beauty and the Range-Hog

OLD Bronc Tally wore a patriarchal beard and, unless someone crossed him, he was as mild mannered as one would expect a man to be who affected such benign-looking facial adornment. But the walnut grips of six-shooters habitually bulged either hip of his long-skirted coat of rusty black. Furthermore, it was well known at Buckner's Crossing, supply center for the Breakneck Valley cow country, that the long, white beard concealed a steel-trap jaw, and that lightning could dart in flashing menace from the depths of his blue-gray eyes.

The "Bronc" part of his name had no allusion whatever to horses or riding. It was bestowed by friends and acquaintances who had happened to witness several of Tally's shooting sprees, after he came to lord it over Breakneck Valley by stepping into the boots of Ezra Cathcart, deceased. Cathcart, before his death, had built up the Flying C cow spread into a vast holding. He had passed one half of it, with full powers of management, to his friend Tally, when an unnamed bushwhacker's bullet cut his career short.

Into the 'dobe-lined streets of Buckner's Crossing one day a capricious Fate guided the choppy-gaited cow-horses of three bronzed young giants to whom even the name of Bronc Tally was unknown, much less a knowledge of his flare-up moods. They themselves were not without some small measure of fame in certain sections of that far-flung cattleland which the Pullman traveler does no more than glimpse from afar.

The friendship which bound them together, in times of good grass and of poor, was similar to that linking the

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immortal Three Musketeers. Only, the cattlemen for whom they had fought drought, prairie fires and northers from one end of the cow country to the other, spoke of the three by a different title—the Riding Pards. The fight of one was the fight of all.

There was Rick Allison, six feet one, blond and blue-eyed as Billy the Kid; Art Baker, five feet eleven, swarthy as a Mexican and as high-tempered; Joe Luce, six feet, full of red-headed hell, a man to ride the river with.

Each had owned his own brand since the time they had first thrown in together. They had diligently practiced saving a part of each month's wages, played poker discerningly and successfully, split three ways the reward offered for a certain "bad hat," and now, following an extended period of herding the dollars bankward, they were ready to invest in grazing acres and breeding stock.

Rick Allison's gaze was hopping among the signs and shingles displayed on either side of the Crossing's main stem, and he suddenly called attention to one bearing the words:

J. DODD, REAL ESTATE

Art Baker nodded, swerved his horse in unison with Rick, and the fire-thatched Luce whooped characteristically, as he hooked his lagging roan in behind as rearguard.

They dropped off their horses simultaneously and clanked past a fat-faced man in unbuttoned vest and rolled shirt sleeves, who was painting a large sign resting on sawbucks in front of J. Dodd's office. The stout individual looked up when he perceived where the strangers were heading, and asked:

"Want to see me?"

"If you're the real estate agent," Luce grinned, glancing back and down. "That sign you're workin' on says, 'Best Eats at the Bon Ton.'"

"Oh, that!" the stout man dropped brush in paint can and came toward them. "There ain't enough real estate sellin' in these parts to keep a gopher alive. I'm helpin' myself out doin' odd jobs—paintin' signs, houses, anythin'. You gents are strangers to me; but we'll soon correct that."

J. Dodd had a gurgling, infectious chuckle, his share of the good humor belonging to the tribe of fat men in general, as he led the way into his office. The three cowpunchers liked him before they had been ten minutes in his company. The bowed condition of his legs rather suggested the horseman, as though he had at one time been a member of the cowboy clan.

"So, you admire the prospect for grazin' cows out yonder in Breakneck?" smiled Dodd, when Allison had stated the case for himself and his friends.

"Sure do! Good grass, plenty water, elbow room to move around in. There must be a lot of grazin' land to be had, for we saw only one ranch headquarters in two days' ridin' and cattle belongin' to just that one brand, the Flyin' C. Fact, stoppin' at a sod-buster's little place last night, we were told that no brand but Flyin' C runs cattle in Breakneck. The farmer was kind of tight on information, over and above that." Rick Allison dipped fingers into vest pocket for a sack of Durham and rice papers.

"Well, your farmer friend felt, likely, as if it wouldn't be discreet for him to crack wide open to strangers about old Bronc Tally. It might result in an unexpected moving day for the nesters allowed in Breakneck—only a handful at that. Never heard of Bronc Tally, pard?" Dodd's brows shot up, and he chuckled. "To tell it neat but comprehensive, he's Flyin' C's half-owner and sure-enough boss; and he claims practically all the range in Breakneck Valley. Not that I'm sayin' he can show deed to it all; he can't. He knows, too, that he'd never win a suit for eviction in court, if somebody with money, nerve and a yearnin' to settle alongside of him happened to hit this burg.

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"By gollies, boys!" Dodd's pudgy fist smacked the desk top across which he faced the grave-eyed, attentive punchers. "I've been waitin' five years for the right party to come here and give that land hog his needin's! You're the answer to a forlorn real estate man's prayer. If you've got the guts and the cash to go through with it, I can sell one of you ranch land east of the Flyin' C, another a similar parcel of land on the south, and set up the third man on the west.

"The reason is that Ez Cathcart, the original owner, who died mysterious from a supposed rustler's bullet five years back, never filed or paid taxes on more than half the land he called Flyin' C range. He pioneered the district. And apparently Bronc Tally, a friend who turned up out of Cathcart's past around six years ago, didn't know the whole of Breakneck wasn't Cathcart's till he came to look over the dead man's papers. You see, Tally produced a scrawl of Cathcart's after his death which willed all his property jointly to Tally and Cathcart's daughter, Eve. . . . Listen, will you!" He stopped abruptly. "There's horses comin' in on the trail from the Flyin' C! I bet you. . . ."

He bounced from his swivel chair with unusual springiness in a man toting so much beef, and stood at the dusty front window of his office. Scrape of chair legs and rasp of steel-armed heels ensued as he called the younger men to his side and pointed at three riders going by in the street.

"There's the smoke-eater you'll be buckin', the one with the beard!" Dodd was breathing hard, as if at sight of an old enemy. "The girl is Eve Cathcart. And the other fellow is the Flyin' C cow boss, Lute Bellew."

"The old man," observed Rick Allison, somewhat surprised, "appears mild as a milk cow—paternal-like."

"Infernal's the word, brother," corrected the fat Dodd. "You'll learn it, if you settle in Breakneck. He ain't called Bronc for nothin'."

"That Eve, she's a looker!" from Rick. Her dark-eyed, dusky beauty had impressed him so completely that he forgot the men riding with her.

"Boy!" exulted trigger-tempered Art Baker, delightedly appraising the white-sombreroed and corduroy-shirted ranch girl, who rode unconscious of the gaze of the four men at Dodd's office window.

"I never fell in love before," Joe Luce announced, "but that fair damozel, she wouldn't have to take very sure aim to bring me down. Nossir!"

Dodd bustled back to his desk, opening and slamming drawers, and pulling out papers, among them an oft-folded relief map of Stockett County, at the southern tip of which Breakneck Valley was located.

"Sit down again, boys," he invited. "I want to be certain where we all stand, before I go surgin' into the bar where old Bronc wets his whistle and drop the remark that I'm sellin' land in Breakneck to gents with guts. Do I want you fellows to side me, you ask? Hell, no! I was a stock hand once myself; over on that peg there is hangin' my old belt and gun. I'll be wearin' 'em!"

CHAPTER II

Gunfighter's Trickery

IT was the shank of the evening when Rick Allison and his saddle mates emerged from the Bon Ton Eating House, rolling smokes and discussing the deal they had made with Jack Dodd. Their horses were stabled upstreet at the O. K. Livery.

"No sign or sound of a ruction," the blond giant remarked, glancing up and down the main stem, his gaze resting longest on the batwing doors of the Friendly Glass Saloon. It was there the ex-puncher and real estate agent had said that Flying C men were accustomed to go. "But I vote that we look in at Dodd's office and see if he's okeh."

When they got there, light glowed in the real estate office, and the door

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stood ajar. Dodd was at his desk, hammering an old typewriter. He was quick enough with an invitation to enter when he saw the three bronzed, questioning faces framed in the doorway.

"You saw Bronc Tally?" Rick asked, stepping inside and leaning against the wall, his friends at his heels.

"Yeppy—and no fireworks!" Sweat beaded Dodd's visage, for it was hot in there. "He said just exactly nothin', and I don't trust that kind of reaction from old Bronc. You fellows want to be on your toes for trouble."

Allison and his *compadres* hadn't looked behind them as they reached Dodd's door or they would have noticed two men leave the Friendly Glass, situated cater-cornered across the street, and watch the three pards enter the real estate office. One of the pair, with slitted eyes above a Santa Claus beard, addressed his companion:

"Dodd said three men with guts—must be them, Lute. If they're tough, I'll make 'em tender!"

He ambled unhurriedly over to Dodd's, went in with Lute Bellew stalking tensely at his side. Dodd got up, squinting narrowly when he saw these visitors and noted the broad smile on Bronc Tally's leather-tough face.

"Howdy, boys!" greeted Bronc then, viewing the trio against the wall with eyes that did not smile as his bearded lips were doing. "Dodd tells me you're buyin' range in Breakneck. If we're to be neighbors, might as well get acquainted. Who's who, now? Dodd, do the honors."

"That biggest hombre," the wary Dodd indicated, "is Rick Allison. Rick, Bronc Tally."

Rick moved a couple of paces forward, hand outstretched. He gave Dodd credit for knowing Bronc Tally better than he could, a stranger; and something in the man's expression wasn't in keeping with this peaceful front. Yet the big cowboy did not suspect the trick that was at the back of Bronc's mind until his right hand was imprisoned in Bronc's own. Though he must have been in the middle fifties, that stringy old mossyhorn possessed a bone-breaking grip!

And Bronc had evil purpose when he exerted full pressure in the gesture of pseudo friendship. His black coat was unbuttoned; the guns along each leg, holsters tied down, hung ready for instant withdrawal. Old Bronc Tally's left hand flung toward the black butt on that side, and the gun came out of the sheath with a quick flip suggestive of greased leather.

Rick Allison, a one-gun man and with his forty-five slung on his right hip, apparently was due for a quick cash-in. He couldn't break Tally's hold and fill his own hand fast enough to avert tragedy. But Rick's wits were racing. He had a second in which to think and to act. His left foot swung in a vicious kick, and he twisted his body to the right at the same time. A kick on the shin is hard punishment. Old Bronc Tally found it so, to the extent that he emitted a howl. Involuntarily his thumb hit the raised hammer of his gun, and a streak of fire seemed to run along Rick's hip simultaneously with the booming of the shot.

As Bronc sagged on his pain-tortured leg, Rick Allison reached for the lowered weapon of his ambidextrous opponent and wrenched it from the slack fingers. It was easy for Rick to withdraw his right hand now, and he shoved the long-coated rancher flat against the wall at gun's point, growling:

"A real old gunfighter's trick, Mr. Tally! Dang near worked!"

Tally answered him with high-powered profanity, which was drowned out suddenly by the crashing of two forty-fives, one thundering a split second behind the other. Lute Bellew lurched backward and butted the door-jamb with a thick-muscled shoulder. A smoking gun wobbled in his hand, and he finally let it fall, pressing right shoulder with outspread left hand.

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That much Rick Allison saw in a quick jerk of his head toward Bronc Tally's companion.

"That'll keep you from gun-tossin' a while, you trouble-prodder!" husked the voice of Art Baker. "Leave that smoker lay now," for the agate-eyed Flying C cow boss had stooped with blood-reddened fingers reaching. "Leave it be till I empty out the rest of them shells!"

Art stepped over to lift the scowling foreman's hog-leg from the floor, and Joe Luce ranged himself beside Rick Allison.

"You had oughta peg out the old snorter's hide for tryin' what he done!" Joe said, fixing blazing eyes on the man against the wall.

"Ain't it so?" responded Allison. "You're a damn fine specimen, Tally! I declare, I dunno what to do about you."

Tally doubtless had some ideas on the subject, but, before he could express them, light footsteps tapped across the office threshold. Miss Eve Cathcart paused just inside the door. She had entered in time to hear Rick Allison's remark, and with bell-like clearness she spoke.

"Suppose you turn Uncle Henry over to me, and I'll take him home!" she said.

At Eve's back, in the doorway and beyond, appeared the faces of such of Buckner's Crossing's citizens as had the temerity to follow Miss Cathcart to the smoke-beclouded scene. It had been more or less anticipated by patrons of the Friendly Glass that Bronc Tally would paint for war after Dodd had made his little spiel in the saloon. But Eve herself, visiting a friend at the hotel, had not been aware of the brewing trouble until the blare of shots drew her streetward, full of a natural curiosity. She had listened to a half-dozen slightly varying accounts of the reasons behind the gunplay from the tag-along crowd, as she turned her steps unhesitatingly toward Dodd's place of business.

Rick Allison risked turning his gaze away from the murderous-looking old-timer and encountered dusky eyes in a lovely oval face, with lustrous blue-black hair above topped off by a smartly tilted white Stetson. Over her mannish blue shirt, Eve Cathcart wore a fringed and beaded buckskin vest which was a fine sample of Indian handicraft. Though her lips were now a thin, tight line, Rick could imagine them curved and smiling in a way to make a fellow's head whirl.

So fascinated was he by the vision that he did not observe how his saddle mates were affected, both staring, slack-jawed.

Lute Bellew, finding himself unwatched and noticing that his gun, not yet emptied of shells, dangled from Art Baker's finger, attempted to reverse the situation by a swift lunge of the left hand. Lute caught the hanging barrel in a desperate clutch and jerked it free. But Bellew had no opportunity to use his retrieved weapon. Bared in his right hand, Art's forty-five described a short arc and smote the Flying C cow boss on the temple. Bellew still stood by the door, and the blow dropped him to his knees. He fell sidewise and stretched out with the feet of those foremost citizens who had accompanied Eve Cathcart almost touching him.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," grinned Art, snapping fingers to hat brim, as the girl glanced at the prone figure, then shifted gaze to the swarthy-skinned puncher. "The way the play come up—well, I could 'a' drilled him dead center and claimed self-defense. But I ain't a killin'-minded man."

"No?" It was impossible to decide from her tone just how she regarded his last statement.

"Maybe you don't know how all this started, Miss Cathcart," Rick spoke, somehow anxious to smooth matters over for the girl's sake, though he could not fathom her attitude. "Your uncle seems not to want any neighbors in the valley, and we're three cowpokes

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aimin' to go into the stock business out your way."

Dodd, in the background, could bridle his tongue no longer. "Allison, you tell Miss Eve how Bronc come in here—"

But Rick hastily interrupted him. He did not wish to reveal Tally's low and treacherous trick to kill him and thus add to an embarrassment Eve Cathcart must naturally feel. "I'll do the talkin', Dodd!"

"If you'll just turn Uncle Henry and Bellew loose, we'll be out of town as soon as we've seen the doc about Bellew and can get our horses up." Eve faced Rick squarely, and he could have sworn there was pleading in her eyes if not in her voice.

She knew Bronc and his foreman to be in the wrong, but could do nothing about it. To keep her standing there, bandying words, would inflict unnecessary mental anguish and, toward womankind at least, none of the three Riding Pards had a relish for doing an unkindness.

Rick nodded, his gaze seeking the hard eyes of Bronc Tally, who had ceased swearing. "That beard, it reminds me of a set of false whiskers; the man behind 'em ain't nothin' like you'd think from lookin' at the Sandy Claws front," the cowpuncher muttered, voice pitched so low that scarcely anyone but Bronc Tally heard. Then more loudly, "Here's your gun, old hoss! Git!" He handed the shooting iron to its owner.

Tally shoved past, wordless, to where Eve stooped by the side of the slowly reviving foreman. With ungentle hand, Bronc shook Bellew, glancing perfunctorily at the flesh wound in his shoulder.

"Here's his smoke-wagon, Miss Cathcart." Art stuck the gun at her, butt end first, as she arose, and Bellew, assisted by his boss, got his legs straightened under him.

The crowd broke and backtracked from the door as Bronc and the girl led the slow-moving foreman out into the night, each keeping a tight hold at right and left elbow when Lute Bellew would have turned around for a last verbal fling at the strange riders. Rick stood waiting, with a tense eagerness strangely new to him, for Eve Cathcart to express gratitude with a word or a nod. But she never looked back, and Rick, disappointed, experienced a queer ache in his chest. He subconsciously heard Art and Dodd swap speech.

"She called him Uncle Henry, Jack."

"Just her handy name for him. He ain't no relation."

Rick was pulling his shirt out of his trousers, to examine the smarting spot where old Bronc's bullet had scorched his hip. But when he spoke it was not of the wound.

"Dodd," he said, "you said there's a lumber dealer in town, didn't you? We'll want to see him tomorrow, after we've deposited our cash in the bank. My idea is to put up just temporary ranch houses on the three sites, but good strong corrals that'll last. That in line with your notions, Art and Joe?"

CHAPTER III

The Wild Brahma Strain

RICK ALLISON hurled his mount up the face of the grama-grassed slope. He was certain that a feminine shriek of pain or fear had welled up a moment since from the far side of the ridge his rangy bronc was climbing in such furious lunges. No repetition of the cry had come to his ears by the time he gained the crest. However, as he saw certain moving figures below, the situation at once became clear to him, and he sent his cutting horse racing down the reverse slope with utter disregard of the breakneck grade. It was such steep trails as this which gave the valley its name.

The place was close by the new boundary between Rick's holding and a portion of the Flying C range, with sluggish Vinegaroon Creek running

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through a narrow canyon bed, from one side to the other of the imaginary line separating the ranches. Though he might have done so legally, Rick had not gone so far as to throw up a line fence to further enrage his inimical neighbor. The cowboy rancher believed in open range country.

Range cattle, with young bulls of Brahma strain among them, dotted the lower slope and the ground adjacent to the steep-walled little canyon. One of these bulls was raising dust at the heels of a horse carrying a slight, feminine rider. These bulls were almost as wild as any Andalusian stock ever bred for sacrifice at a matador's hand! Had the rider been anyone but Eve Cathcart, Rick would have called that person a box-headed fool for attempting passage through a bunch of such cattle.

Allison, although his sliding, plunging cow-horse threatened every second to nose-dive the rest of the slope's length and pile him in a bad throw, was giving the most of his attention to the girl running before the bull. Her horse was not, he thought, hitting the high pace its long limbs indicated the animal was capable of doing. The roan-colored bull, long-legged and rangy, would soon close the gap between its wicked, horned head and the flying tail of the running horse.

"I see what's wrong, by golly!" the young cattleman thought to himself. "Her bronc's hindquarters are draggin' some. That bull must've run in and gored the horse while I was over the ridge. That's why Miss Cathcart screamed! But somehow she got away before old Brahma could get set for another charge at close quarters. Lucky for her that bulls ain't usually as quick at wheelin' as cows. . . . Hell's fire! Her saddle's loose, too, and that crazy horse is headin' straight for the canyon rim, a drop of fifty feet easy."

Allison's mount was at last at the bottom of the slope. It stumbled over a grass-hidden rock and recovered its feet only because of the rider's quick shift in the saddle and his powerful upward heave on the reins. The horse tore on, to overtake the racing figures ahead, which now were close to the rim of Vinegaroon Canyon. Undoubtedly Eve's mount had taken the bit in its teeth, for she could not fail to see where she was going and realize that peril menaced her before as well as behind.

Rick expected to see her die right before his eyes and unconsciously braced himself for the tragedy. While his own horse was spurning the ground gallantly, to reach the wall above the creek, Rick watched the girl tugging with every ounce of muscle on the reins. Meanwhile her saddle slipped farther and farther over to the left, and the wild-eyed Brahma hammered on, to finish the race in sanguinary fashion—if Eve and her horse didn't go over into the Vinegaroon first!

"God!" muttered the hotly pursuing Rick. "If she only had a gun! But no, she couldn't turn round in the saddle now!"

Then a yelp of real agony burst from his lips. The saddle with the loose cinch slid around so as to topple the girl off the horse's back. The edge of the canyon wall was not far away. But at the same instant the horse wheeled obliquely, tore away at a tangent—and what horrified the pursuing cattleman was the sight of Eve Cathcart's body jerking along the ground against the horse's doubling and stretching legs.

Her right foot was evidently trapped in the stirrup iron. The saddle was hanging almost under the bronc's belly, but the cinch held. Eve would be dragged to her death, if Rick Allison didn't gain her side in time. She made no outcry, and he guessed at once that she was either unconscious or worse.

Rick yelled, swore, lifted his horse forward in a dazzling burst of speed. The rump of the roan bull flashed before him. Slower to shift its course than the crazy horse, the Brahma had

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nevertheless veered away from the canyon rim.

The erstwhile cowpuncher's hand slid down to his sixgun, snatched it from the leather. He was mechanically preparing to end the roan bull's part in the tragic chase, even while his thoughts were with the silent girl ahead. He was wondering if she were alive, realizing that in one way it was fortunate her saddle had slipped from under her when it had—the sudden pull of her weight on the stirrup had swerved her horse out of an otherwise unalterable dash straight over the canyon rim. Certainly she would have been killed in that leap, and there was such good reason to believe death would result from her present plight that Rick refused to think about it until he had her safe in his arms.

Rick's horse pounded up behind the charging Brahma. The rider's gun arm swung, and fire streaked downward in a shot lined for the bull's shoulder. One set of hoofs slithered and stumbled; the other set crashed on, making sparks fly from the flinty soil. The bull was dying in its tracks as Rick spurred a last spurt out of his sweating bronc and came up at the heels of Eve's horse, which naturally was retarded by the girl's dragging form.

To the head of the runaway, on the side farthest from Eve, Rick pressed. Grabbing the loose reins, he pulled the frightened animal's head close to that of his own mount, then neck-reined the two broncs together with a swift turn of the leathers. Trying to hold the girl's mount as still as possible, Rick slipped from the saddle and hastened around to the girl's side, opening his Barlow knife on the way. Better ruin a stirrup leather than risk having the excited horse put its heels down on the girl while he was trying to work her foot loose.

A glance at Eve's face while he slashed through the stirrup leather and drew her away, to squat down with her soft, yielding form in his arms, was not reassuring to the rescuer. She was deathly white, her eyes closed. But there was no indication that an iron-shod hoof had crashed against her head, from which the white sombrero had fallen away. He glanced sharply back to the point near the canyon rim where she had been unceremoniously dumped by the sliding saddle; after all, she hadn't been dragged such a long way.

He began a careful examination of head and body for injuries. Blood trickled from her thick, glossy hair, but it seemed to be but a scalp wound, from contact with a rock. He opened her jacket halfway, bared a white shoulder marred by a swelling bruise.

"Gosh! She must be covered with bruises like that, and no tellin'—" He stopped, for the dusky eyes had opened and were gazing up into his; there was undoubted pain in them. Her lips moved.

"You. . . . " she whispered.

"I didn't introduce myself by name last time we met," he said, bending his face lower, not aware of the agony of fear for her that his gaze reflected. "It's Rick Allison. I heard you holler while I was over the ridge back a piece, saw what was up and—well, don't try to talk unless—could you manage to tell me if any place hurts you special bad? Bein' dragged by a horse is likely to prove a death ride in most cases, but you look far from dead. And—and I'm sure glad you ain't, Miss Cathcart."

A weak little smile curved her lips at his speech. He reflected that if she could smile at all, there was a good chance she hadn't been seriously hurt.

"My foot that was caught—pain there," she murmured, grimacing.

"Let's see." As gently as he could he removed the half-boot. "How does that feel?" he asked, meanwhile exploring foot and ankle with careful fingers. She moaned a little, but not as would a person whose ankle was broken. "Ankle sprained, maybe not so bad, either, though it's swellin'. You can't put that boot on again. What

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else is wrong?" He sighed in a relieved way which did not evade her notice. She was sitting up, feeling herself over.

"Well, I feel pounded to a jelly. But no bones broken, kind sir. I want to thank you—" she began.

"Please!" He tossed up his hand. "Glad it ain't no worse. Had to kill that Brahma bull or the critter would have mixed up things at the finish. If old Bronc gets sore—"

"I'll settle that with him. Half this ranch and stock are mine, you know."

"If you don't mind my askin', what were you doin' in among those wild cattle?" he queried suddenly. "Bein' ranch raised, as I understand you were from Dodd, seems to me you'd know better."

"I do," she said and smiled, the color drifting back into her cheeks. "But they don't usually bother anyone on horseback, and I'd have been all right if my cinch hadn't been loose. I took a chance on stopping to fix it, and seeing me dismount was too much for that red fellow. He came tearing after me, and there was nothing for me to do but get on and ride, loose cinch and all. He got my horse once, at that."

"And he all but got you," Rick replied gravely. There was a look in his eyes that seemed to indicate that even the thought was painful to him.

"I shall never cease to be thankful to you," Eve murmured.

"'Twasn't nothin', Miss Eve," Rick answered, much embarrassed. "Now, shall we be gettin' you back to Flyin' C headquarters? There ain't much I could do for that ankle, but I'll see you safe home and ride to Buckner's Crossin' for the doc."

"Your escort is accepted with thanks," she told him sincerely. "We can telephone the doctor from the ranch, however."

"Sure, sure!" Rick had risen and walked toward her horse, now standing quietly beside his own. "How come that saddle to slip?"

"You a cowman and ask that?" her laugh rippled forth in musical cadence. "The answer is I must have been careless tightening the cinch when I left for my ride. Is my horse hurt much? That bull gored his flank."

"So I noticed. It ain't bad. That was when you hollered out, eh?"

She nodded as he seized the saddle to right it on her cow-pony's back.

CHAPTER IV

Drygulchers

TWO weeks had passed since Rick, Art and Joe had bought separate ranch sites in Breakneck Valley, and in that time temporary homes had been erected for each by crews of carpenters and laborers from Buckner's Crossing. Nothing had been seen or heard of the dwellers at the Flying C during that period, and as Rick jogged along beside Eve that afternoon he aired his curiosity regarding Bronc Tally.

"Your Uncle Henry feel any better toward his neighbors?"

"He's not really my uncle, you know," she said, turning her gaze from the blue distance. "He was a friend of Dad's younger days. Turned up here about the time I went away to school. I hadn't graduated yet when the telegram came announcing Dad's death."

Mist gathered in the lovely eyes, which Rick was studying sympathetically. "It was all more or less of a mystery how the killing came about; the coroner's jury gave a verdict of murder, by 'party or parties unknown,'" she continued. "Some talk of rustlers who were working the district at the time. Anyway, Uncle Henry found Dad still alive, but almost gone. He'd never made a will so he made one then, leaving half his property to me, half to Tally."

Rick dropped his gaze to his horse's ears. He could not forget the gun trick Tally had tried to play on him, and a man capable of such treachery might well be guilty of killing from ambush, even though the victim was supposed to be a friend of long stand-

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ing. Half of a ranch the size of Flying C would be a big inducement! Rick thought that if he were in Eve's place he'd be mighty suspicious of "Uncle Henry." Perhaps she was, at that, only wouldn't admit it to a comparative stranger. She knew Tally had been fighting to keep all newcomers off Breakneck range; but did she know his methods, such as that gunman's trick?

"I reckon you'd like to catch that unknown murderer some day." Rick faced his riding companion again, caught her looking at him wonderingly.

Her fine mouth assumed a grimness of expression which was repeated in the depths of her tear-dimmed eyes. She put up a hand to clear away the lingering mist and spoke almost savagely. "Wouldn't I! I'd give anything to discover who it was and bring him to justice! But if he was a rustler, I suppose that's a vain hope. The gang's sloped the country long since."

"You didn't tell me yet if your—if Bronc Tally's attitude has changed toward us or is the same," he gently reminded her.

"The same—hostile. I've tried to make him see where he's wrong in wanting everything—"

Their horses had been traveling for some time over a road flanked on either side by chaparral, and the shadows of evening had begun to blanket the sharp-ridged landscape. Eve's speech was curtly terminated by the flash and roar of a six-shooter from the tangled growth on the right, on which side Rick Allison rode with hat tilted low.

The hat dropped off; the young cattleman blinked his eyes and swayed uncertainly as the bullet worked a furrow across his scalp. It had a momentary numbing effect, but he was sufficiently aware of his peril to throw the spurs into his horse and reach for his gun. The weapon slid forth with a dragging motion not much like his usual fast draw. Fire replied to fire in the chaparral, but there was no outcry to indicate that he had hit anyone. He couldn't see who had tried to drygulch him, was only guessing where to aim by the hanging shreds of powder-smoke among the tall, green mesquite branches.

His horse leaped under him at the rake of the rowels, and concern for the safety of the girl brought a yell of warning to his lips. But it died only half uttered. Eve was riding like the wind over the thicket-fringed trail, and in spite of his mental confusion, a revolting thought took form and made him sick. It wasn't unnatural that she should seek safety in flight; in fact, he would have suggested it himself, in another instant. But did her quick getaway portend more than a response to the instinct of self-preservation? Had she known in advance that someone from the Flying C lay in wait, had she deliberately led him into ambush and then run away? Well, if that were the answer, if she had stepped off the high pedestal on which he had placed her to become the tool of Bronc Tally, she and Bronc were going to find out Rickard Allison was a hard man to put down.

That first shot had ripped him plenty bad, but he was still in the saddle and full of fight. The shock induced by the bullet's passage was wearing off as he dashed uptrail, only to grab the reins tight and haul back as a gun opened up on the opposite side, some twenty yards ahead. Working a crossfire, eh?

"Come outa cover there, you damned sneaks!" Rick roared, incensed rather than dismayed by the discovery that his enemies were lurking on all sides. "Ain't you satisfied with havin' the odds? Afraid to take a few chances?"

The second shot had passed him by harmlessly, no doubt partly because his horse was in vigorous motion. Besides—and this in a measure explained the first drygulcher's bungling shooting—the ambushing parties were so careful not to reveal themselves, they crouched so far back from the trailside, that the interlaced branches of the mesquite must

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interfere with their sighting on the trapped horseman. Moreover it was getting along toward dark, and that helped Rick, too.

Of course no man showed his head at Rick's challenge. But the guns commenced spitting again from both sides of the trail. The young cowman heard the buzzing of lead uncomfortably close, and was moved to desperate decision. It would not be a bit more suicidal for him to charge one of the hidden attackers than to fork his curveting horse out there in mid-trail.

"Let's go!" he yelled at his mount and swung the animal's head around toward the smoke-fogged spot in the chaparral where the outpouring of flame and lead informed him that an enemy lay. He rode low in the saddle, gun stabbing fire to confuse the unseen killer—perhaps to stop the other's gunplay by a lucky shot.

A bullet launched from the ambush downtrail must have struck his horse when the animal was only a few paces from the outer fringe of mesquite. It broke stride, lunged sideways, whinnying with pain; then suddenly it reared. Rick Allison, top-rider, wasn't quite prepared for all this, because of his concentration on the brush-masked enemy. He was shot from the saddle and landed hard on a shoulder. But he did not lose his gun; and he lay still, realizing, as he listened to his horse running away, that his own ends might be best served by shamming unconsciousness or death.

"I pinked his horse, but not bad, for it's still burnin' the road, boys!" announced a voice from the vicinity of the first bush-up. "How's it with Allison, eh? I can't shoot so good with my left or I'd 'a' got him as he come up the trail alongside Eve. I'm sure goin' to enjoy salivatin' that dark-faced jigger who leaded up my shoulder, even more'n handin' this Allison his ticket."

It was Lute Bellew, Tally's cow boss, speaking, and his boot heels, crunching on stones in the road, indicated his approach. From the sound of slow-paced hoofs, he was bringing his horse with him. Rick lay facing the chaparral and therefore could not see Bellew at the moment without turning. But he perceived two cautious figures parting the mesquite branches in front of him, each carrying a gun, and these men constituted a greater menace just then than Bellew. Bronc Tally was not present, seemingly.

A quick offensive was Rick's only hope of life. If those peering, slow-striding men decided to put a bullet in him, to make certain of his demise before coming close, well, it was up to him to fire first. Must be a couple of shots left in his gun. He dared not reload now. The harsh tone of one of the uncertain pair, replying to Lute Bellew's question, sent Rick into frenzied action, as if the sound of that voice had released a tight-coiled spring within him.

"I don't reckon he's even hurt, Lute," the man was saying. "Horse throwed him and knocked—"

A bullet, buzzing hot out of Rick's six-shooter, knocked the speaker down. The young cowman had drawn up his knees in a movement smooth and swift, his long-barreled Colt swinging straight out for the man's chest and spewing flame. When the Flying C cowhand dropped, breaking branches of the mesquite bush nearest him, he lay huddled up and quiet.

The fallen man's companion straightened his lowered gun arm with a startled curse. Until then he had felt pretty sure that Rick was powerless to do harm. Now the blaze of the triggered gun, a finger of fire hot and smoky, seemed to reach Rick's face as he was springing to his feet, throwing his gun on the standing figure. Blood spurted from a wound slashed in Rick's cheek by the grazing bullet. Already blood from his plowed scalp was trickling down the other side.

Rick's second bullet—and last!—sped to its target. But it was launched under circumstances tending to per-

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vert his aim. The burst of flame before his eyes, the rake of lead along his cheek, unsteadied him in the act of pulling trigger on the Flying C man. What should have been a lethal shot caused Rick's opponet to lurch, to list slightly on his portside as if Allison's bullet had branded his hip or leg.

Then Tally's rider spread his legs and stood firm, firing again. He missed! But down the road another gun tuned in, and Rick was conscious of a bullet snarling past the back of his neck. Doubtless as surprised as the other two at Allison's quick coming to life, Lute Bellew was joining in the attempt to rub out the lone fighter.

Rick, with empty gun in hand and no opportunity to reload it, apparently hadn't even a slim chance of survival. But the blood of die-hard Westerners in his veins prodded him to a last, desperate effort. He hurled his gun at the spraddle-legged fellow in front of him, narrowly escaping contact with an-another lance of lead from the latter's Colt. As the heavy forty-five dented the gaunt features of Tally's rider—who wasn't expecting the throw and could not duck in time—Rick Allison followed after the gun and reached his enemy in two jumps.

For the moment he was not visible to Lute Bellew, downtrail, and avidly tackled the job of finishing what he had begun before the cow boss could reach him. The Flying C cowpuncher wasn't quite knocked out, though he was lurching around in a daze, his gun arm relaxed. Rick caught that arm almost effortlessly, wrested the Colt from the stumbling, grunting drygulcher. He had good reason to pour smoke into the fellow's hide then, but he didn't. Instead Rick slammed him with the gun barrel, a solid blow which laid the staggering figure low, face down beside the dead man.

A short distance from where they lay, Rick crouched in the brush with cocked gun, ready to receive Bellew when the latter should burst out of the chaparral. But now Rick no longer heard the steady tramp of Bellew's booted feet nor the click of shod hoofs. The young cattleman's lips tightened grimly. He realized that Mr. Bellew had turned cagy at the last moment.

"Loop!" came the cautious tone of Bellew, evidently addressing the man whom Rick had beaten to earth. "Did you get him?"

Allison did not reply, though he had faint hope of baiting Bellew into a trap, whether he maintained silence or spoke out and let Bellew know at once how matters stood. He straightened from his crouch and stepped toward the trail. He had no fear of facing Bellew or any other man in the open since he had obtained a loaded shooting iron to place them on equal footing. Making no effort at stealth, his boots snapped branches of mesquite, and almost simultaneously he heard the stir of a horse's hoofs, as if Bellew were turning his animal around.

When he emerged into the deep-shadowed road, Rick saw Bellew topping the saddle, but turned around, with Colt half lifted. A hot pulse of flame shot from the weapon the instant that Allison's big frame came into the Flying C foreman's view. But Rick had dodged, and heard the crack of a stone close by his feet as the hasty bullet traveled low. Bellew put his bronc to a run down the road, firing back once again, and drawing fire from the tall cowman. Whatever the real quality of Bellew's nerve, he was evidently suffering from an attack of spookiness tonight, after he and two others had botched the job of downing one lone rider.

Evidently the shots Rick sent humming toward the flying horseman did not take effect, for Bellew sat in the same half-crouch, facing the rear, gun fogging until more than fifty yards had been covered and it was a total waste of lead to keep firing any longer. Presently the leader of the drygulchers vanished around a bend.

The gun of the Flying C man hang-

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ing at his side, Rick turned slowly toward the heavy brush; then stiffened and jerked at a roaring discharge. Lead cut through a wing of his chaps. He knew that the man he had lately gun-whipped must have recovered his senses, sufficiently at least to grope around on the ground and secure the six-shooter used by his saddle mate, who had died under Rick's hand. Rick pulled "Loop's" own Colt to hip level, shouting:

"Drop that! I can see you good, Loop!"

As a matter of fact he couldn't distinguish the man's form at all in the gloom of the surrounding brush; but the flash of the other's weapon had located him to the startled cowman.

But Loop was game or crazy to kill, perhaps both. Orange flame splashed the thicket yet again, with the echo of Rick's speech still in the air. The weapon's fire showed that Loop had rolled before cramping trigger a second time, for it blazed out several feet distant from his first firing stand. And that bullet nearly got the tall, blond man standing in the trail.

The cowboy whipped a shot toward where he supposed Loop's body to be lying. It came so fast on the heels of Loop's most recent attempt to cut him down that Rick calculated the other man would have no opportunity to roll to safety. There came a cry, a crackling in the brush, as if the Flying C puncher had half struggled to his feet with death striking his vitals; then a heavy fall, a moan, heavy breathing, ultimate quiet.

There was no sham about Loop's passing, now. Rick went to him with gun bared, reaching for a match. He found the fellow on his back, eyes wide and staring as the flame hovered over his face. Examining the six-shooter held in death-gripped fingers, Rick ascertained that it was not his own and made further use of matches in retrieving the Colt he had thrown in desperation at Loop's head.

He sighed heavily, wiped the blood from his face, and set about reloading his gun. Then he looked for the horses of the pair he had been prodded into slaying. This sort of thing was not to his liking. He wanted peace and a place to raise cattle and make a home; but it appeared as if he would have to fight for the right to enjoy peace and its profits.

The stamping of the horses, lately ridden by the dead men, drew him far back into the chaparral in his search. He led the animals over to the road, wondering if a similar attack had been made upon his friends, Art Baker and Joe Luce, that day, and whether or not he should leave the drygulchers where they had fallen.

"Reckon I will. They're on Tally's range and it's up to him to clean up the mess that he's responsible for," he muttered, rubbing a shirt sleeve against his wounded cheek. "I'll borrow one of these broncs till I get home, then send it toward its home ranch."

As he led the horses out into the road and swung to the back of one, he found himself listening for hoofbeats uptrail. In a more tranquil state of mind he couldn't really believe that Eve Cathcart had played the decoy for the ambush that had failed. But if she hadn't, if she had merely responded to the instinct for self-preservation in executing that quick getaway, why was it that the girl did not return to the scene, after the shooting was over, for the purpose of learning how he had fared? Possibly she was too scared to come—but, no, he rejected that idea. Not the kind who was easily terrified, was Eve Cathcart.

Well, even if she had had no part in the treacherous plan to drygulch him, Rick would have thought much better of her if she had returned to ascertain the results of the bush-up. He'd begun to think a good deal of Eve. . . .

In the hope that she was not far away he raised his voice, calling her name, although it occurred to him that he might be running some risk in announcing his presence on enemy terri-

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tory. She did not answer; he waited, hands folded on the saddle horn. But she did not come. He pivoted the horse he was astride, and started down toward his own range.

Light shining forth from the windows of his new home made him exercise caution as he rode into the front yard. But when he saw the familiar broncs of Baker and Luce tied to the hitching-bar up by the porch, he relaxed and grinned. He walked in to find his friends had raided his larder.

"That's right, make yourselves at home," he greeted them, dropping saddle from hip to the floor.

Art and Joe squinted narrowly at his blood-stained condition.

"Been tryin' to steal some Flyin' C's for your range and got caught at it, eh?" Art said, but the grim set of his lips belied the joking speech.

Rick drew up a chair to the unpainted kitchen table and proceeded to satisfy his hunger. At the same time he related his experiences from the moment when he had discovered Eve Cathcart riding to escape from the Brahma bull.

"It looks like war with Tally, all right," he concluded. "He knows he can't get rid of us through a court order, because he don't own the range we've settled on; so he means to fight under cover. When we're hirin' stock hands, we'll have to be sure they know how to shoot as well as work cattle."

"Keno!" assented Baker. "I like a fight, personal, although I'd be glad if that girl wasn't mixed up in this."

"Same here," commented Joe Luce. "She's sure the kind I'd admire sparkin', but, hell, what chance will a fellow have with her if he's fightin' Bronc Tally?"

Rick glanced from one to the other with a queer feeling in his breast. These friends of his were as thoroughly smitten with the charms of Eve Cathcart as he was himself. He wondered vaguely if the long-standing friendship among the three of them was going to split eventually over rivalry for the favor of this lovely ranch girl. Well, he for one wasn't going to work up any jealous fit. Let the best man win and the losers take their medicine without swallowing too hard.

"I know what you're thinkin'," Art Baker spoke, mistaking the speculative look in Rick's eyes. "You're still wonderin' why Eve didn't come back to find out if you were killed. I'd say it must 'a' been a good reason, and she sure never helped trap you."

"No, she's not that kind," Rick replied, "though I'm ashamed to admit I did suspect her for a little while."

"Trouble with you, pard," said Joe Luce, with twinkling eye, "is that you figure she cares more about what happens to you than maybe's the fact of the case."

Rick had to laugh. "A fellow's own conceit sometimes does play him tricks, Joe. It is sure possible I don't stand deuce-high with Eve."

CHAPTER V

Killer at Large

ART BAKER and Joe Luce stayed the night with Rick, discussing until an early morning hour such important matters as the stocking of their individual ranges, the hiring of efficient hands, and the purchase of equipment and supplies. But at least one of the decisions at which they arrived, where they should buy breeding herds, was altered some two hours after sun-up of the following day. Late in rising, the three friends were just finishing breakfast when a buckboard team pulled into the yard. In some surprise they trooped out to greet Bronc Tally and Eve Cathcart. Bronc was armed as usual, yet his manner was anything but war-like.

"It's partly Eve's doin' that I'm here makin' the peace sign, boys," declared Tally. "I mean she's argued with me from hell to breakfast, ever since you hit the valley, that there's room enough for us all without scrappin'. As the Flyin' C is half hers, naturally she's

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got some say about things concernin' the outfit. But I ain't altogether lackin' in sense or gratitude, whatever you boys may have thought of me up till now. And after the way you saved Eve's life yesterday, Allison, I couldn't hold my grudge any longer. I'm here to 'pologize for bein' crusty and suggest we cooperate peaceful, like neighbors oughta."

The speech rolled off his tongue glibly enough and his blue-gray eyes were beaming friendliness. Yet Rick, for one, did not altogether trust the old-timer. He did not answer Tally at once, but glanced past him at Eve, who was leaning forward in her seat, showing by her smile that she considered this moment one of the little triumphs of her life. She had persuaded unrelenting old Tally to her viewpoint.

"How's the ankle?" Rick asked her.

"Doing nicely, thank you. A sprain, as you thought, Rick. I can't do any walking and very little riding for a while. And you—how did you come through last night?" Her face was grave as she looked at the bandaged cheek of the tall, blond cowman, the bandage being held in place by criss-crossed strips of court-plaster.

"I could easily forgive you, Rick," she continued before he made reply, "for believing I decoyed you into that gun trap; but I didn't! I swear not! Even Uncle Henry had no idea what Bellew and his cronies were up to."

Rick swallowed that about "Uncle Henry" with a grain of salt, but hastened to assure her by saying, "Whatever I thought of the part you might have played in the beginnin', Miss Eve, I sure changed my mind right sudden. Knew you'd have no hand in a murder. But what happened to you? I waited—"

"My horse threw me a second time," she interrupted, "not more than a mile from where the ambush was sprung. The animal was scared enough before that shot from the brush made it bolt, and I had the use of only one stirrup. My grip on the saddle horn was broken by the brute's sunfishing. You may think I'm not much of a rider, if I keep falling off. Well . . . I lay on the ground for what seemed hours, in fact until my horse had got to the ranch and Uncle Henry started looking for me. If I'd had a gun with me I could have summoned help sooner."

Rick stood by with the look of a remorse-stricken man. "Good gosh, all the time you were only that far away, needin' help—and I didn't know. I called, but I might 'a' known there wouldn't be much chance of bein' heard. I never played the fool worse! You poor kid!"

She smiled brightly. "Don't blame yourself. When Uncle Henry and two of the boys came, I sent them down to look for you. Not finding you but only the bodies of Loop Marston and Jim Cochise, we figured you must have got away alive. And that was confirmed when we reached the ranch and found Bellew there, drinking and raving like a madman, because he had failed."

Here Tally, an intent listener, broke in. "Bellew's a good hater and just as good handlin' men and cows. But he's through at my ranch—Eve's and mine, I mean. We ain't hirin' no man that acts without orders, specially in the killin' line. I'll admit I didn't know whether I'd fight or make peace with you fellows till last night, but Bellew, with his killer streak, hatin' all of you and Art Baker in partic'lar, 'count of that shot in the arm, started out to clean up on his own hook. That's one of the things we come over here this mornin' to explain and set right."

"I recollect Bellew's sayin' somethin' about he'd be glad to sift lead into Art, while I was layin' near the chaparral last night," Rick said. Art and Joe were gazing steadfastly at the bearded old cattleman, but Rick's gaze had wandered to Eve's face. From his study of it, he was certain she believed everything that "Uncle Henry" said regarding lack of knowledge of Bellew's movements. "I reckon," Allison

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drawled, shifting his eyes back to Tally's weather-toughened face, "that you fired Bellew and he's left the country on a fast horse?"

"Hell, no! He's tied up, back at the house, and I aim to have him go on trial for what he done! He'll be in the Crossin' lock-up before night."

Rick was surprised. After all, had old Tally been telling the truth, had the cow boss, a good hater, acted on his own initiative?

"Sounds as if you mean to do the right thing, Tally. But are you tellin' me there's any law and order men at Buckner's Crossin'?"

"There's a marshal and a justice of the peace. Why?"

"Where was the town marshal the night we had our little argument in Dodd's office?"

Tally grabbed a handful of beard and combed it with his fingers. It seemed to Rick that little red spots danced in his eyes. "I dunno," he said. "Drunk maybe—he often is."

But Rick Allison held the belief that the Buckner's Crossing marshal was the "trained dog" type, who knew when to shove his muzzle into a row and when to keep it out.

"Everything seems to be clearin' up pretty fine, Tally, and I'm glad. A range war is bad for business. Many thanks to you, Miss Eve, for your part in preventin' it." Rick was sincerely hoping that a lasting peace had dawned, as much on the girl's account as for any other reason; but he doubted it greatly, even as he shook Bronc Tally's outthrust paw and stood aside for Art and Joe to seal this agreement with a handclasp.

Rick walked around to the girl's side of the buckboard; but he had no more than imprisoned her offered palm in both of his than his spur-chinking friends were attracted in the same direction. Old Tally leaned back, lids lowered over his eyes, to watch these Indian-tanned sons of the plains pay the lovely girl homage. It was her due; she had always attracted men to her. But no male attentions, West or East, had turned the level head of Eve Cathcart.

"We're goin' to the Crossin' on ranch business," Rick spoke, "so we might as well ride along with you to the Flyin' C and head from there. We can lend a hand with your prisoner. By the way, Tally, how soon you sendin' some of your punchers to drive Flyin' C stock back on your side of the Vinegaroon? We'll be trailin' in herds of our own."

Bronc snapped erect. "Who you gettin' 'em from?"

"Hadn't settled on anybody; but there's a cattle buyer in town who can probably tell us where there's prime breeders for sale."

Tally's open palm smacked his knee. "What's the sense of buyin' of an outside market? With so much of our range cut off, Eve and me will be overgrazed in no time, bunch of stuff we carry. We can give you a better price, too, and you pick your stock."

Rick glanced at his friends. Such a deal would help the Flying C and that would help Eve Cathcart as well as Bronc Tally. Besides, the troubles of a long trail drive from some other part of the country or the expense of shipping, would be eliminated. Art and Joe nodded.

"Reckon we can make a deal," said Rick.

"Sure!" Bronc stated vehemently. "Throw the kacks on your ponies and come lodge complaint against Bellew at the J. P.'s office."

While they were roping up their mounts and saddling, out of earshot of Bronc and the girl, the three young cattlemen discussed Bronc's about-face in the matter of range relations. Art and Joe were willing, even eager, to give him the benefit of the doubt; and there could be no question but that the allure of Eve Cathcart was basically the reason for their loud-sung praises.

Yet Allison, equally attracted to the girl if not more so, did not seem any too optimistic when alone with his

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pals. "Don't break your necks tryin' to alibi the old mossyhorn. He once meant to do us plenty damage, if he doesn't now. Wait! He'll get all the chance there is to prove up on his friendship."

"Aw, you're too hard-boiled!" Art flared, half angrily. "He's made the peace sign, said he was sorry. And the girl—"

"Is wonderful, and straight as the handle of a brandin' iron," Rick finished for him, swinging into the saddle.

They were rather curious to see how Lute Bellew would look and act as the prisoner of his former employers. Art and Joe felt that he alone must be guilty of planning the ambush or he would have accused Bronc Tally of conniving at it quickly enough. Even Rick didn't size up Bellew as the kind who would shoulder all the blame in silence, if Tally were culpable. A short stop only was made at the Flying C headquarters, while the hogtied Bellew was transferred from the blacksmith shop, which had been his prison, to the back seat of the buckboard. The killer did a bit of cussing, especially at sight of Art Baker, who was responsible for winging him at their first meeting. Then he slumped down in sullen quietude as the trip to Buckner's Crossing was continued.

In the presence of the justice of the peace before whom Bellew was haled, Rick swore out a warrant for "aggravated assault and battery, with intent to kill." Following a preliminary hearing, Lute Bellew's trial was set two weeks ahead. He was denied bail and given into the custody of a soft-walking, angular man with ropy mustaches, the town marshal, Ab Fenton. Rick's brows were corrugated and he wrinkled his nose, as if at a taint upon the air, as the party of men left the J. P.'s stuffy office. There was something decidedly smelly about the whole business. Bronc Tally was too anxious to railroad his former employee, and Bellew did too little protesting when not granted bail.

Finally, Tally and Eve went home. Rick and his friends remained, to attend to the hiring of men and the purchase of supplies and ranch equipment. Rick had questioned whether or not it would be advisable to seek outfit riders at some place other than the Crossing, because of a possible malign influence of the Flying C, which heretofore had had things all its own way. But Jack Dodd put him right. The big spread, since Tally had bossed it, was not as popular as it once had been.

There were even two or three men still hanging around who had received their time from Tally without just cause, and they would be glad to hook up with the invading spreads. With a list supplied by Dodd, Allison and his friends spent the late afternoon and early evening in looking up jobless cowboys, and ended by each hiring a full crew of men who could shoot as well as ride and rope.

By that time gnawing hunger turned the steps of the budding cattlemen toward the Bon Ton Eating House. It was while they were ordering dessert to round out a meal such as only giants of the open could stow away, that a man in nondescript garb entered and went among the tables, passing out handbills.

"Reward notice for some jigger that's done infracted the law, I reckon," Art Baker said, lazily scanning the printed words. But he saw that it was the announcement of a dance to be held a week hence at the town hall. His interest quickened, and he folded the handbill to tuck it into his shirt pocket, whistling unmusically through his teeth while he covertly eyed his companions. "What's yours say, Rick?"

"Same thing yours does, only louder," Rick grinned, and shoved the paper into a pocket also.

Joe Luce was imitating his friends in disposing of his copy. "See how a li'l' piece of paper can stir up dust, by gollies!" The red head's grin was widest of all as he lolled forward, elbows

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on the table. "D'you reckon her ankle will be well enough, a week from now?"

"Sure," nodded Rick.

Art Baker had a faraway look. "Let's see, we're all of us about the same distance from Flyin' C headquarters, and if we start at sun-up, it oughta be a good race. No good to bother her tonight. She looked wore out when she left town and likely will be abed by now."

They still had the buying of supplies and equipment, including a chuck wagon for each of the new outfits, to do. So it was nearly midnight when three loaded wagons stood with restive teams before the general merchandise store, ready to start for the new ranches in Breakneck Valley. The main street at this hour was usually deserted, but cowboys, with blanket rolls and warsacks hanging on their saddles, were making the night lively with hoofbeats and talk-swapping, as they converged on the general store from sundry points in Buckner's Crossing.

Rick, Art and Joe were standing on the boardwalk by the store, checking up arrivals. When the last man had come in, Rick told the punchers to get going, take the wagons along, and he and his friends would catch up with them. Straightway Allison, Baker and Luce departed in the direction of the O. K. Livery, where they had put up their horses.

No wrangler greeted them as they stepped in through the wide barn door, Rick slightly in the lead. They expected to find a man on duty somewhere within the dim, lamp-lit interior, but no such person appeared as they tramped down the alley between the rows of stalls. It struck them as strange, this lack of a hostler, yet no sense of lurking danger disturbed them.

"We'll leave the money on that soap box at the door," Rick remarked, slapping his bronc's rump so that he could squeeze into the stall and untie the halter-rope. "Reckon we don't need anyone to get our broncs for us."

He was backing his horse out, his wide shoulders and flat back toward the rear of the big livery barn, where scarcely any light penetrated from the stable lanterns hung on posts. The roaring discharge of a six-shooter smote his ears, and simultaneously he felt the searing pain of hot lead strike his left shoulder. He had just emerged from the stall, pushing the horse ahead of him, and both arms were raised to grip the halter. The left dropped at his side when the bullet plowed his flesh. Numbness succeeded the first stab of pain, and he rocked dizzily on his heels as his mount, frightened, tore loose the halter-rope, whirled and tore down the alley for the open double doors.

Rick reeled back into the empty stall, his gun hand falling to the butt of his Colt. In the next stall down, Art Baker, startled by the shot, was clinging to his horse's halter, though slammed this way and that by the frantic beast which had been sideswiped by Allison's runaway. Joe Luce's voice broke out still farther along the row, asking what the hell was up.

"One guess and I'd say it's our old friend Bellew, out of jail and huntin' notches!" Rick replied. "I dunno just where he's at."

He did not mention his wound, but dropped off his hat and risked presenting a target long enough to project his head a few cautious inches past the outer edge of the stall partition. That the other man saw him was at once evident, as fire pierced the gloom some thirty feet up the alleyway above Rick's position, on the opposite side of the barn.

That projectile of death whispered close; it all but peeled skin from Rick's unhurt cheek. But he had been ready to fire back when he embraced that hazard to locate his enemy, and now he brought his gun forward with a snap and let drive. There was the splinter-

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ing *tunk* of lead smashing through wood and a low, vicious laugh, unmistakably in the voice of Lute Bellew, who was supposed to be in the lock-up.

"It's Bellew, and I've spotted his hide-out, anyway," Rick called to the others. "He's planked behind that big feed-box over there beyond the last stall. The son-of-a-gun! That guy is a pest!"

"Sorry I didn't get you, Allison—so far!" snarled Bellew, from his feed-box barricade. "You fellows can't do me no harm, but I can do you a-plenty. You're in the light every time you look out or push a gun out. This is a showdown!"

Art Baker had contrived to keep hold of his horse, and on sudden thought stepped forth from his stall close against the animal's body. He jerked the halter rope savagely, trying to advance the snorting, unruly beast toward the shadowed angle where their foe crouched. Art's pistol was in his right hand, and though he knew how little chance he had of reaching Bellew through the grain-filled box, he fired across his horse's bare back, shoving desperately the while on the halter.

His shot was answered quickly and Art sprawled down on the floor, profanely announcing that he'd been hit in the leg. His legs, showing underneath the horse's belly, had appealed to the hidden killer as more temptingly targetable than his low-tucked head.

Better than Art himself, perhaps, Rick Allison realized his pal's desperate predicament, for Baker lay in the broad alleyway, fully revealed by the smoky glow of the lanterns, easy prey to gunfire. Finding itself free, Art's horse had wheeled about and thundered down to the barn door. Joe Luce had let his struggling animal go, and the horses in other stalls were fighting to break loose and run.

The thunder of forty-fives was making mad melody there in the livery barn!

CHAPTER VI

Embattled Cowmen

RICK ALLISON'S Colt was doing the fastest talking. He yelled, "Crawl, Art, for your life!" and stood out where Bellew could see him plainly, bent in the gunfighter's deadly crouch, sending shot after shot into that corner where a gun flamed once in aswer, then was suddenly still.

The big blond cowman wasn't deceived by the layoff in Bellew's shooting. It did not indicate either that the late Flying C foreman had impeded any of the bullets raking his corner, or that he temporarily held an empty gun. Bellew's silence meant that he had dodged down behind the feed-box and was lying doggo until the furious trigger-twitching of Allison ceased.

Bellew would have been a fool to keep his head or any portion of his body exposed, just to take another crack at the erect cowman or the crawling one, when shelter was so handy to him. There would come plenty of opportunity to make the pair sweat when the atmosphere wasn't so dangerously charged with spatting lead.

"I'm clear!" yelled Art Baker, from inside the stall to which he had crawled, painfully dragging his leg.

Rick's gun hammer almost simultaneously slammed on a empty shell. He retreated with a cat-like leap. Yet, to show that Bellew had kept count of Rick's shots and was keenly alert, a bullet sped and slashed chips from the front of the partition as Rick sprang backward. The blond cowman's lips were set grimly as he dumped the hot and useless shells from his Colt and reloaded. He thought that Bellew probably was doing the same thing over back of the feed-box, for the latter had kept his six-shooter a-smoke pretty steadily since the fight started. For all that Rick knew to the contrary, Lute Bellew might have a brace of guns at hand. It was this uncertainty which had deterred him from executing a quick rush across to the feed-box, in

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the hope of catching the killer without means of defence.

Allison got down on his knees, then flattened and began to hitch himself under the semi-partition into the stall occupied by Art. The swarthy cowman was sitting up with cocked gun on knee, his wounded leg stretched out straight. Rick squatted beside his pal.

"Get you bad?" Rick inquired. It was too dark to see much there in the stall.

"Not bad. Through the fleshy part," Art answered. "No time to bother about that now. I can't stand up alone, but—"

"You don't need to, what I've got in mind," Rick hastened to say. "The coyote nicked me in the left shoulder, but, like your wound, it's through the meat, not the bone. Hey, Joe," he called softly.

Despite the gloom at the back of the stall, they both could see Luce's head as the latter poked it under the half partition of the adjoining stall. "Want me in there? I ain't had a chance to let one shot flicker yet."

"Here's your chance, then," Rick declared. "Crawl through. I've got it figured out how we can get that fellow. He may not be any good to us alive, but there's a chance of it—certainly no chance if he's taken dead. You've noticed that window above the feed-box? Well, listen to me, you cow barons, or we may never live to brand our first calf crop."

When he had finished outlining what he intended to do, speaking so low that the man at the other side of the barn could not possibly distinguish words, Rick waited while his friends crawled, one after the other, into the stall which he had recently vacated. Being nearer the hiding place of the killer, this stall would enable them to shoot more directly into the feed-box corner. While such advantage might have been increased by moving up two or three stalls, the horses occupying the boxes would have offset the gain by the menace of iron-shod, excited hoofs.

Rick dropped flat and slid beneath the partition into Joe's stall as a whispered "All right!" reached him in Joe's voice.

Up till then, Lute Bellew had been quiet. He fired as Rick crouched in the box which formerly had held Luce's mount; it was a tentative shot, striking high two stalls away from Rick.

"Seems like you crusty jiggers must all be sleepin'," Rick heard Bellew say in a tone tinged with suspicion of what the prolonged quiet on their part might portend. They had made no more noise than necessary in taking up new stands. "Reckon I'll wake you. . . ."

The tail-end of Bellew's speech was roared down in the long-rolling thunder of two weapons fired nearly together. Art and Joe had turned their batteries on Bellew's corner. Meanwhile, Rick, reasonably certain that the rapid firing would divert the ex-foreman's attention for a few vital moments, rose to his feet and darted down the lighted alley, stooping over and swinging from side to side as he ran.

The guns were still pounding as he reached the door, dashed out and down the runway. Bellew was evidently too busily engaged with the pair entrenched in the stall to throw down on the man who had made the break to end an intolerable situation.

Men were running toward the livery barn along the main street as Rick sprang into the open. He could hear rapid hoofbeats on the out-trail from the Crossing, the rataplan growing louder every second and plainly heralding the whirlwind return of the cowboys that he and his pals had sent ahead of them. The shooting, though somewhat muffled by the walls of the barn, must have impressed the newly hired hands as a warning of danger to their bosses. At any rate, they were coming back hot-hoof to learn the truth and take a hand, if need be.

Rick did not pause to enlighten the approaching townsmen regarding the situation, though questions were

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shouted at him and he noticed the dull gleam of guns carried by several. The powder-burning had lulled inside the building as he ran along the sidewall toward the window which opened above the feed-box. Rick wasn't worried by the cessation of the Colts' roaring; it merely signified that the weapons of the fighters were empty and being reloaded; or so he hoped.

Recollecting that the window in the barn wall was too high for him to reach without something to stand on, Rick was well pleased to observe several bales of hay piled not far from the corner he had whisked around. Shoving gun into holster, using his left arm with difficulty, he yanked one of the wired hay bales down and turned it end over end until it was beneath the window. He sprang upon it, just as the barn shook from a new series of gunpowder blasts. Rick's friends and Bellew were exchanging leaden compliments once more.

The bale of hay put Rick in the right position to get at the window, which, as he had thought would be the case, was locked on the inside. He hauled out his gun and smashed a gap in the pane big enough to admit head and shoulders. Heedless of jagged edges, he leaned into the barn, depressing the muzzle of his gun so that it covered a dark figure stooping low behind the feed-box. Rick's eyes were sufficiently accustomed to the dark so that he had no trouble in discerning the man-shape the instant he looked down. And he saw Bellew was looking up at him, mouth agape, gun half raised in his left hand.

"Put it down, I've got you lined!" the blond cowman barked at his enemy. "I reckon you're a worse surprised hombre than I was ten minutes ago, when you opened up on us fellows. Never thought of this window at your back, didja?"

He spoke crisply, but was not obliged to raise his voice, for the pair in the stall across the barn had left off shooting as the window pane crashed and rained glass on the dumbfounded Bellew. The ex-foreman knew when to fight and when not; his gun hit the floor by the feed-box and, on further order from Rick, he stood up and emerged slowly into the lighted alleyway, both hands raised. The left was higher than the right, for he still must favor the injured shoulder, although it was healing fast.

Joe Luce pounced on him as he came into the lantern light, and with his gun against the man's ribs, searched Bellew for another weapon—and found it, tucked in his waist band, covered by his buttoned coat. Art Baker had pulled himself upright by the stall partition and attempted to walk; but when he put his weight on the injured leg, it and his stomach seemed to turn over simultaneously, and he slid back on the floor.

Rick had dropped down from the window on the outside when Luce took Bellew in charge. Now he bustled in at the front door, with townsmen and recently arrived cowpunchers at his heels. When the facts were known, the cowhands wanted a lynching, and several started to get their ropes. The rafters of the barn were better than a tree limb for hanging purposes. Rick noticed that, while the punchers clamored for Bellew's immediate death, the townsmen had nothing to say, and he deduced the reason. Bellew was—or had been—old Bronc Tally's right bower, and Buckner's Crossing residents were still in awe of anyone connected with the Flying C.

"Now here," Rick said authoritatively; "there's goin' to be nothin' like that. If I wanted Bellew killed I could 'a' done it myself a few minutes ago. No rope needed, boys. He goes back to the hoosegow. I'm wonderin' how he got loose."

Someone at that moment discovered the livery-barn wrangler at the back of an empty stall, trussed up and gagged. But when the fellow was released and could talk, the sum of his knowledge was that Bellew had surprised him as

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he was smoking on his box by the door, forced him at gun's point to submit to being tied. It sounded like the truth to Rick Allison; the wrangler had not willingly become a prisoner and let the cowmen walk into that trap.

Joe Luce moved streetward with the recaptured jailbird; Rick gave his assistance to Art, and the mob of punchers and townfolk trailed them to the door of the jail. As many as could do so squeezed into the marshal's office when Rick touched match to a lamp wick. At the first sound of footsteps in the office, a voice recognizable as Ab Fenton's began calling from a cell at the rear for someone to come and release him. Rick's face was grim, unsmiling, when he located the town marshal locked in one of his own cells.

"What happened?" Rick inquired tersely.

"That double damned Bellew grabbed my gun, when I carried in his supper," snorted Fenton, trying to look righteously indignant. "I've been locked up since supper time. Glad to see you caught him, Allison! What did he do after he slipped away? I was listenin' to a lot of gunwork somewhere."

"Laid for us in the livery barn; waited hours for us to come there and get our horses." Rick would have taken oath that the town marshal knew all about it, but there wasn't a shred of evidence to prove that Fenton's imprisonment had been a part of a set-up to save the peace officer's face.

"Whatcha got to say for yourself?" The marshal's gaze flicked to Bellew's sullen visage.

"Wait a minute," Rick said. "Let's clear this office first. Everybody outside but just them that's most concerned."

The crowd knew whom he meant and melted out through the front door, though somewhat reluctantly. Besides the marshal, the prisoner and Rick, there remained Luce and Baker, the latter seated and looking pale.

Rick stared hard at Bellew. "You might as well come clean!"

"What?" snarled the ex-foreman.

"You're still in Bronc Tally's pay; he expected you to kill us tonight at the barn. That business of firin' you off the ranch is just a bluff, to fool us three fellows and Miss Cathcart—and that goes double for his lettin' you be locked up, and not makin' any effort to bail you out. He wanted you here in town, knowin' you'd be turned loose at the right time. Apparently you weren't workin' for him any longer; so anything that happened to us couldn't bang back at him."

"You think you're smart, but you're only crazy!" rapped the agate-eyed Bellew. "When I hate a man's guts, like I do yours and Baker's—"

The marshal, very red of face and on his dignity, couldn't wait for the other to finish. "I reckon you're slanderin' me, Allison, and I won't stand for it! I didn't turn Bellew loose, as you're hintin'. It come about like I said; I was caught short."

Rick perceived that no word of his could break down their united front. Tally was going to be protected, no matter what. The big cowman spread his hands. "All right, all right!" he said. "Now that we've returned your prisoner, see to it he don't trick you again. An alibi mightn't save you another time. Here's your guns, Fenton. We're goin' to see a doctor, Baker and me. Hate to disappoint anybody, specially Bellew, but we've only got flesh wounds."

The three cowmen left the jail office, Rick and Joe at Art's elbows to help him along. They stepped out into the milling group of cowhands and townspeople, who, watching through the windows, hadn't heard much.

"Which way to a sawbones?" Rick asked the nearest man.

CHAPTER VII

The Running Irons

RICK was saddling a horse at dawn. His shoulder wound, thickly bandaged, made him clumsy about it, and

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one of the new hands, sighting him at the corral from a bunkhouse window, pulled on shirt and boots and ran down to aid.

"You're not ridin', boss?" the cowboy said, astonished. "With that shoulder?"

"Sure," nodded Rick. "What's a clean gunshot wound to hinder a man? I've got important business at the Flyin' C."

The puncher's glance darkened. "Want a man or two to side you? If you sashay into old Tally's lair, it's liable to end in fireworks."

"Not goin' to see Tally—Miss Cathcart is the party," smiled Rick. "Hurry with that rig, fellow. There's a race on between my pals and me. They'll be startin' from their ranches about now—even Art Baker, who can sit a horse if he can't walk. He told me last night when we parted comin' home that the race was still on."

The cowboy squinted thoughtfully. "I catch you. It's that dance at the town hall next week! First man gets to her asks the lady, huh? Well, you ain't the first men have gone daffy over Miss Eve. She's sure a thoroughbred!" Swiftly the cowboy drove a knee into the standing pony's ribs and hauled up the cinch.

Rick stepped up in the saddle and rode away. And he rode with the wind in his throat, hard, laying on the quirt the last mile, clear to the dooryard of the Flying C, which was a pretentious Spanish house built on the open plain, with many outbuildings and corrals. As he hauled up his steaming bronc, Eve, very fair to look upon in a neat house dress, limped to the main door opening off the gallery.

"Surprise!" chuckled Rick, dropping to the cinder path and swinging his hat. "Am I here first?"

"Why, what do you mean?" She opened the door with a welcoming smile, and he went up the steps quickly to help her to a chair on the gallery. "Glad to see you, of course. Anything the matter?"

Rick passed her the handbill he had got in the restaurant the night previous. "I'd like very much to take you, Eve."

She glanced up, studied him a moment quizzically. "I'd love to go. It'll be lots of fun. Did you lather up your horse so early in the morning, just to come here and ask me that?"

"I'd do more than take a little ride, to be sure of your company, Eve." He smiled down into her eyes, and his earnestness must have impressed her, for she suddenly looked away.

As she did so, drifting spurts of dust appeared out on the plain in front of the ranch house. Still another series of smoky spurts came into view, traveling from another direction. Two horsemen were coming at a furious pace, converging on the ranch.

"Look!" she exclaimed, starting up.

"Art and Joe," explained Rick, grinning widely. "They're arrivin' pretty near neck and neck. Mostly, Eve, I don't aim to beat out my pals in any kind of game; we usually stand together. But—" He knew what he wanted to say, but he hesitated to say it.

"But 'all's fair in love and war,' accordin' to the old saw. That's what you meant, Allison?" It was the voice of Bronc Tally at the door. How long he had stood there the young cowman and the girl could not know.

Rick flushed as he turned, missing the same quick coloring of Eve's smooth, brown cheeks. "I reckon somethin' like that, Tally. Good mornin'. You're in time to see the end of the race. We decided to ride at sun-up, first man here to ask Eve to that dance. We had a little trouble in town, long after you folks left." He was eyeing Bronc narrowly, but there was no altering of the old cattleman's pleasant expression behind his Santa Claus beard. "Art Baker is ridin' with a hole in his leg, and I—I've got a hole in my shoulder. Lute Bellew got footloose and aimed to salt us down when we went for our horses."

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"How awful!" Eve turned grave eyes from Rick's bandage-bulging shoulder, which had escaped her notice till then, to the face of Tally, who strode out on the gallery, demanding particulars. "Bellew is like a mad dog, Uncle Henry!"

Rick rapidly sketched the details for them, inwardly skeptical of Tally's wrath.

"That fool marshal!" Bronc roared.

He had time to say no more before Art Baker arrived on a sweat-darkened bronco. Rick moved over to the edge of the gallery and dropped a hand on the black-eyed rider's shoulder, as Art sat with cloudy eyes and jaw muscles twitching.

"You're a game one anyhow, old pal!" Rick declared heartily, knowing from these signs that Art's hasty temper was close to breaking bounds. Art's disappointment at losing the race manifestly was great; his interest in the girl greater even than Rick had conceived it to be.

"You win—but don't paw me, Allison!" Art shook himself angrily to dislodge the friendly hand.

Rick was taken aback, for Art had the name of being a good loser, never had flared up at Rick until then. In the background, Eve and old Tally missed none of this byplay, Bronc storing away the scene in a cranny of his mind for future reference.

Up to the ranch house whisked Joe Luce, his red head aglow under the sun. His horse slowed, stopped, nearly sitting on its tail and flinging dust and gravel toward the gallery. There was a smile on the red head's face, but rather a twisted smile. He swallowed hard before he spoke, meeting the anxious eyes of the girl, then shifting his glance to Rick.

"Drag-ender, no luck at all, me!" he exclaimed, his pleasant tone palpably forced. "Sure you didn't start before sun-up, Rick?" He laughed as he said it, but Rick was a trifle stung. So Joe was inclined to take his defeat hard, too!

"You know I always shoot square!" Allison replied brusquely.

Bronc Tally combed his beard thoughtfully, for the situation was thought-provoking. These three young men had clearly demonstrated that Eve held their fondest hopes of happiness in the hollow of her slim hand. Might she not become a bone of contention among them, turn against one another these saddle mates, who probably had never quarreled seriously over anything before in their years of palling around? It was a hole card worth considering, and Bronc Tally metaphorically tucked it up his sleeve.

But first he intended giving his gun-throwing foreman another chance—the last. Heretofore Bellew had never failed to blast the hopes of would-be invaders of Breakneck Valley.

A sudden tension had settled upon the group of four men and one woman; but that one woman was equal to the emergency.

"Believe me, boys," she included them all in her sweeping, dark glance, her brown eyes smiling and sincere, "I feel honored by your attentions, particularly under the circumstances. I promise, Art and Joe, to save dances for each of you, and I'll introduce you both to some mighty nice girls, friends of mine who are sure to be there. Will that make it all right?"

"Sure," Joe Luce was first to grin; he dismounted with thud and jingle; went over to Art's horse to help the rider down.

"I only hope my ankle will be all right by then," Eve said, watching Baker's somber face a little anxiously as he came up on the gallery, Luce assisting him. "I think it will be. But you, Art, what about that bullet through your leg? Rick was telling us about it."

Art had steered his supporter straight for the girl's chair. "Don't get up. Want to say I'm sorry I showed a bit yellow. I can take it, as a rule. That goes for you, too, Rick, old pard. Miss Eve, I'll be on hand to

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sling a hoof if I have only stumps to carry me."

"Had breakfast, you fellows?" inquired Bronc Tally. "No? Well, come on in and I'll have the cook throw a bait together. Then we can talk over that cattle deal. Sooner the better, I reckon. Never mind your broncs, they'll be taken care of."

By midday fifteen hundred head of Flying C cattle, five hundred each to Rick, Art and Joe, had changed ownership on paper. But no money was to be passed until the stock was delivered to the three new layouts in the valley. Tally said his men would get orders to round up the breeding stuff that afternoon; the buyers could come out and look it over the next day.

There ensued a week of great activity for all concerned, except Art Baker, who left it to his friends' judgment to pick his herd, while he gave his injured leg a chance to heal. Neither his nor Rick's wounds had become infected, because they received medical attention so soon after being inflicted. Vent-branding the Flying C was the first job undertaken by the men of the new spreads upon delivery of the cattle. The next thing was to get the stock accustomed to the new range boundaries, and this kept the punchers riding early and late.

The night of the dance, Rick added an item of dress to his careful attire, which would have caused comment in several quarters had he been observed. He took a spring-holster, containing a short-barreled Colt thirty-eight, from his warbag and fastened it under his left armpit. That shoulder was now well enough to permit removal of most of the bandage or he couldn't have fitted the holster snugly in place. He had worn that gun long ago, while serving as deputy sheriff in a hot spot in Arizona, when a law and order man often had need of a shooting iron in reserve.

The disfiguring strips of court-plaster came off his cheek; he wanted to look his best this night. And as he later guided Eve Cathcart over the waxed floor of the town hall to the rhythm of a waltz tune, an Eve more alluring than ever in a red velvet evening gown, Rick Allison knew that he had never been so completely happy in his life. He already worshiped the girl, but their friendship was too new, he felt, for him to speak of love. Better give her time to know him better.

And there were Art and Joe, each loving her silently; perhaps she would come to care for one of his pals more than she did for Rick himself. The blond cowman experienced a pang like a knife jab at the thought of losing her, even to Art or Joe. Then a sense of shame smote him deeply, for they were like his brothers. He would be big enough, in that event, to wish the lucky man the best in life.

"You're tearin' 'em up in that red dress," Rick murmured, as their cheeks almost touched. "I mean you look wonderful! And you're dancin' like a feather; never'd think you'd had a sprained ankle. Better sit out a couple of dances to rest it."

She was looking at him with a seriousness he did not understand, until she spoke. "What is that bulge under your left arm? I just noticed. Surely not a bandage. . . . "

"So you've found me out," he returned, eyes grave on the instant, "though I wasn't really tryin' to hide from you that I'm carryin' a gun—in a spring-holster."

"But why?" she whispered back, as he guided her deftly among the couples treading the floor. "There is no danger tonight, surely. Uncle Henry went to the jail and saw that Bellew was locked up safely."

"He did, did he?" There was a speculative glint in Rick's blue eyes. "Well, thinkin' things over before I started from home, knowin' I'd be obliged to check my belt gun at the door here, I decided it would be horse sense to harness on the extra smoke-iron, just in case."

"Still feel our outfit's not to be trusted because of your reception when

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you hit this country?" Her gaze was unfathomable.

"I'd trust *you* with my life any old time," he assured her. "But the rest," he resolved not to mention "Uncle Henry" unless she did, "well, I've killed two Flying C men, another is in jail, and maybe they have pals who would like to get revenge. That town marshal don't like us and I don't trust him. Let's not talk about 'em—but can you blame a fellow for preparin' to defend himself?"

"No," she answered slowly, and there was no hint that she was displeased with him, he gladly noted. "But there's been shooting enough—even for a Western girl like me."

The waltz ended, she strung a shapely brown arm through his to walk toward the side of the room. Art Baker sat on a bench against the wall, talking animatedly with a pretty, sunburned ranch girl; but he was quick to shift his attention to Eve as she approached. Poor Art was practically out of the running as far as dancing went; his injured leg proved insufficiently healed to allow much capering about.

It was nearing midnight and already several parties who had long distances to go had departed, when Marshal Ab Fenton stepped into the main entrance of the hall, caught the eye of Rick Allison during a lull, and beckoned. Rick slid over, heart-beats quickening. Was this the signal for the awaited trouble to commence?

"Get your friends, Baker and Luce, and come outside in the plaza," said Fenton. "And fetch along Bronc Tally. It's important."

The plaza wherein the town hall stood was planted with cottonwoods and pepper trees, and fairly well illuminated by street lamps. There was a long hitch-rack in front, strung to capacity with saddle horses and wagon teams. Horses also stood at nearby hitching-posts and along the picket fences enclosing the yards of Buckner's Crossing residents. The livery barn had already been filled when Rick and Eve, Art and Joe, meeting by chance on the trail in, had arrived; so the four had tied up at the town hall rack.

Rick, grim and silent but with brain busy figuring, followed the marshal to the place at the rack where these four horses stood. Art was limping along with Joe's support; Bronc Tally came next; and Eve was close to Tally, having followed when she saw the men quietly and mysteriously leave the dance floor. Her eyes were abnormally bright, her breathing short and quick, as if she had been running.

"What's up?" Rick demanded as the group formed around the tail-switching horses, for the marshal had led them straight to that point and halted solemnly.

Fenton had been holding his left arm rigidly against his side. Now he raised the arm, disclosing in his clasped fingers a short iron bar, like a poker.

"You name it," he said.

"Rustler's tool—a runnin' iron, uh course," Rick responded, his whole frame tensing. He was hardly aware that other people were flocking out of the town hall, lured by a promise of some new excitement, and adding themselves to the little group already formed.

"Just so!" nodded the marshal. "This your horse, ain't it, Allison?" He laid a hand on the flank of the nearest animal. As Rick's head bobbed, Fenton went on. "Queer thing to drop from an honest man's saddle, this runnin' iron, you'll allow. Now, whoa, hear me out!

"I found it thisaway. Got tired of settin' up at the jail, waitin' for this shindy to bust up, so I came walkin' along here. Just as I got opposite this here horse, it started stampin' and put its hoof down a coupla times on somethin' that gave out a sound like metal. I investigated and found 'twas this iron. I knowed the horse was Allison's, and noticed the next two in line belonged to Baker and Luce; so I

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lifted the skirt of each saddle and dog-gone if there wasn't a runnin' iron tied under them skirts. The irons are there yet, if anybody wants to look."

"We might," gritted Rick, his jaws hard clamped, the flame of anger licking up fiercely in his eyes, "considerin' that the irons weren't on our saddles when we hit town."

"Dunno nothin' about 'em, never saw 'em before, eh?" Fenton snorted derisively. "Well, it's to be expected cow-thieves wouldn't admit their business, not in no such surroundin's. Now, Tally—"

"I don't understand," Bronc pushed forward. "These boys, they just lately bought fifteen hundred head of breeders off Eve and me. Why should they be carryin' runnin' irons?"

"I shouldn't have to explain that to an old mossyhorn," Fenton jibed at Tally. "They are addin' to the bought stuff with some that's brand-burnt. Easy way to wealth, says I!"

"You're right, Fenton!" yelled a Flying C cowhand in the crowd, suddenly. "If the bosses can't see it or believe it—"

There came an interruption, the cracking impact of Rick's flinty fist on the point of the marshal's jaw. He hit with his right, weighting the punch with all his hundred and eighty pounds of fighting man. Marshal Fenton teetered on his heels, grabbed wildly at the air, and slipped down in a curving huddle. Rick was rubbing aching knuckles on the lapel of his coat when he became conscious that Eve stood at his side, that her fingers fluttered along his raised arm.

"Of course it's not true. I know that!" she spoke so low that none but Rick could possibly hear. "But don't, don't shoot!"

Beside himself, Eve was the only one who knew that he was armed. He glanced at her curiously in the lamplight, speculated vaguely on what thoughts must be passing through that lovely head. Was she fearful for him or for her "Uncle Henry"? No riders of the three new spreads were there to back up their bosses, but plenty of Flying C men.

"I nailed that lie right in Fenton's teeth," he remarked, speaking so that the crowd in general could hear, as well as Eve. "Us fellows don't have to steal cows, and this is nothin' but a rotten frame-up!" His eyes switched sharply to Tally, who stood like stone, then lifted to reach beyond the old rancher. "If that addle-pated cowpoke who shot his mouth off a minute ago will step clear—"

"You betcha!" the stock hand started with a whoop and a rush, and others, who were his pards at the Flying C, moved swiftly too.

But Bronc Tally swung his long arms at their full length and stopped the rush.

"Back up! I ain't give any orders to jump Allison or his pals. It's business for the law to handle. Get a hatful of water over at that trough, somebody. See what you can do to fetch Ab around."

Eve crossed to Tally's side while a puncher bowlegged off for the water to revive the somnolent marshal. "Uncle Henry," she said, laying a firmly persuasive hand on his shoulder, "you know those boys wouldn't pull a trick like brand-blotting. Can you imagine them riding to a dance with such tools on their saddles? And the only one of the three in physical shape to rope and tie a cow is Joe. Art can hardly stand alone, and Rick—"

She was still arguing with the strangely tight-mouthed Tally when a hatful of water smacked the town marshal's face and brought him to. He sat up, feeling for his gun, sputtering that he was going to arrest the trio.

Rick stood with his friends, thinking fast. Should he or should he not whip the gun from his armpit holster and resist Ab Fenton? But a fight, he realized, would not clear them of suspicion; and besides, Eve had entreated him not to start shooting. Better to let the marshal get them away from the

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crowd, permit him to play out his string. There was more to this business than a scheme to arrest them as cattle-thieves. Rick cautioned his cursing companions as Fenton lurched toward them, the lamplight shining on his badge and a long-barreled Colt in his clutching fingers.

"I'm jailin' you jiggers as suspicious characters!" he bawled. "Extra charge against you, Allison, for bustin' a law officer!"

Eve stepped forward, cheeks burning. "It's an outrage! Somebody hid those irons on the boys' saddles while they were inside. Uncle Henry, why don't you—"

"Better let Fenton lock 'em up for tonight, girl, and they can have a hearin' before the J. P. in the mornin'!" Tally spoke. "Maybe they're innocent, maybe not—I dunno."

It impressed his hearers, many of them, that he was not overanxious to search the range for proof that those running irons had been used; as though, like a good neighbor, he were reluctant to believe evil of other neighbors.

Eve Cathcart stood motionless, no longer remonstrating in behalf of her friends. What more could she do? A sense of helplessness overwhelmed her as she watched the three young cowmen led away. She glanced sidelong at Bronc Tally, who was lighting a cigar. In the match's flare his bearded face was inscrutable.

Some of the men started to trail prisoners and officer jailward, but Tally sharply called them back. The worried girl paced slowly toward the hall, her pleasure in the evening's entertainment utterly spoiled. She thought of nothing now but what she could do for the cowmen under suspicion.

If Eve had never before entertained dark thoughts of Bronc Tally, she did so then. What would it profit Marshal Fenton to put the cattle-thief brand on the new valley ranchers? On the other hand, it would benefit the Flying C to have them railroaded to the State pen. Their outfits would break up.

"We'd better be makin' ready to go home," Tally remarked to her, pausing in the lighted doorway of the hall. "Folks are all headin' home. It's late."

"Not just yet," Eve replied, meeting his glance keenly. "I want to think! What's happened has upset me, for I'm sure those running irons were planted and purposely found by Fenton."

"Don't seem likely, but account of them boys bein' our friends, I hope it can be proved," Tally said softly and stalked inside.

For a time Eve paced the railed platform fronting the hall, but the intermittent flow of departing guests, seeking rigs and saddle horses for the homeward journey, rendered mental concentration difficult. Besides, her ankle gave painful notice that she had been standing on it overlong. Eve went to the railing at the side of the stoop and sat there as if perched on a corral fence.

The girl pondered, among other things, the fact that Rick hadn't pulled his hidden gun during all that ordeal which terminated in his arrest.

"He was wise not to, though he could have won temporary freedom," she summed up his restraint. "Knew it would do him more harm than good in the end . . . perhaps it was because I asked him not to shoot."

The idea pleased her. And yet somehow it was comforting to reflect that he was armed without Fenton's knowing it—"just in case," as Rick himself had said to her, cryptically. Eve sighed heavily; the whole thing was such a mix-up. Then suddenly she caught her breath, listening. The moaning of a human being had sounded faintly not a great distance from her. She traced the source of it to the wide alley separating the town hall on that side from the brick bank building.

Eve swung long legs across the railing, dropped into the alleyway without thinking of her weak ankle until she landed; then she winced. The moaning continued at intervals, guiding her

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in the pitch dark. Her nerves jangled as she stumbled over a yielding object, a body.

"Who is it?" she called.

No reply came, only a repetition of the long-drawn moan. She stooped, swept her hands over the body—a man, a rotund man, and she guessed his identity even before nimble fingers extracted a match-box from his coat pocket and she struck a light to make sure.

"Jack Dodd!" she murmured, horrified.

Yes, it was the ex-cowboy and real estate dealer. He lay on his face, limply a-sprawl, and subsequent lighting of matches showed to Eve his grievous injury. No gun, but a knife had cut Dodd down, striking him in the left side—a knife thrust delivered from behind! Blood was oozing steadily from the deep slash, staining the back of his coat. Eve remembered having seen him on the dance floor possibly half an hour previous to the town marshal's appearance with his bad news.

She ran down the alley toward the front, raising the alarm. Men's voices answered her cries just as the thunder and boom of distant gunshots traveled up Main Street from the direction of the jail. Eve stopped still, pressing the back of her hand to her bloodless lips, while her heart skipped a beat!

CHAPTER VIII

Shooting Madness

MARSHAL AB FENTON nudged his three prisoners into the jail office with a menacing gun and grinned saturninely. A cold-blooded proposition, this Fenton, with an outlaw record which none in Buckner's Crossing or the surrounding cow country knew—except Bronc Tally. His intentions being what they were, Fenton couldn't help comparing the three with sheep being driven to slaughter.

Hence the grin as he faced Allison, Baker and Luce under the lamplight. It had been clever of old man Tally to recall the crowd which otherwise would have tailed them out of curiosity; for, to accomplish his purpose and make it look right to the outsider afterward, Fenton must waste no time.

"What's funny?" snarled Art Baker, his temper worked loose because of the turn events had taken and a steady, maddening throb in his leg. He clutched Luce's shoulder to maintain his balance. Rick was keeping free of all encumbrance, for a reason neither his pals nor the marshal suspected.

"You're funny!" retorted the marshal. "Smart jiggers, but not smart enough. Goin' to steal Miss Eve and old Bronc blind, wasn't you? Haw! haw! But toddle along to the cell-room, boys. I ain't listenin' to any arguments tonight!"

The three shuffled on ahead of him; Art and Joe cursing high and wide, now that women were no longer present; Rick silent, frowning thoughtfully. There was a catch in this somewhere. They wern't going to be held for trial, although it would be possible for the Flying C to manufacture evidence to prove their guilt. The killer light flaming in Fenton's mean eyes had suggested to Allison what the end of this farcical arrest might be. He wasn't forgetting that that other enemy of theirs, Lute Bellew, was under the same roof, too.

"Welcome to hell!" broke forth Bellew's grating voice as the new prisoners and the marshal passed into the corridor lined on one side by iron-barred cells. The only tenanted cell was Bellew's, whose face, with lips curled back in wolfish grin and eyes mere slits of venom, was pressed hard against the barred door. Huge, stalking shadows of the four men were cast upon the far wall of the corridor, which got its illumination from oil lamps in brackets.

Fenton produced his keys, unlocked the door of the cell next to Bellew's without taking eyes or gun off the three cowmen. Rick made a step as if to enter the cell as the door swung

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wide. Fenton's gun still covered him, and the marshal's voice, cracking with some strange emotion, warned:

"No—stand back with the others, Allison! Over against the wall, all of you! I want that door open so's I can say you fellows ganged on me when I ordered you inside."

Tight-lipped, the three cowmen backed off the few steps necessary to bring their shoulders in contact with the corridor's adobe wall. Rick was mortally afraid that his friends, desperate and preferring death while in action to passively awaiting the rending smash of lead, would wade into Fenton's gunsmoke prematurely. He spoke to attract their attention, "It's *ley friego,* boys—like facin' a Mex firin' squad. And the marshal's got an easy out; killed his prisoners when they tried a breakaway!"

"The damn louse!" Art roared. "It's Bronc Tally's idea, I reckon. Fenton ain't got the brains for it. . . ." He paused. Rick was attempting to signal some message with his eyes, supplementing it with a barely perceptible head shake.

Art was in doubt as to what he meant; also Joe Luce. At any rate, their puzzlement held them in check when they might have hurled themselves in a hopeless frenzy against lancing shots from the marshal's Colt.

"Fenton," spoke Rick, his voice betraying none of the tension under which he labored, "how about takin' my hands out of the air? I—we're all plumb a-wearied, keepin' 'em up."

"Okeh!" The marshal nodded briefly. He had made sure their belts and six-shooters were not on them.

Fenton's forty-five weaved to and fro, his pale eyes lit by an unholy fire. That instant the avidly peering Bellew shook his cell door furiously.

"Hey, Ab! Let me out! Don't you dass kill 'em! That was to be my job. You get the glory!"

Fenton's figure jerked, as if the passionate words were a quirt-lash, snapping him out of a spell of some sort. He was goaded by a rampant lust to kill, which had lain partly dormant for some years. "We'll divide 'em, Lute," he said. "You save me one man, the biggest; he smashed me in the face."

"I'll smash you if you don't lemme out!" Bellew snarled back at him.

Marshal Fenton hesitated. Opposite him stood the three tense figures, the arms of two of them hanging down, those of the third man folded across his chest. It didn't strike Fenton as singular that Rick's arms should be in that position, bringing the fingers of his right handy for a swift thrust beneath the left breast of his coat. Ab Fenton never thought of an armpit holster.

The marshal's hesitation vanished. Rick saw his eyes blaze anew with the killer light. Apparently it had been prearranged for Bellew to do the actual killing, as the most aggrieved party, but Fenton's nature would not let him be satisfied to take no active part in it. One victim should fall to his gun, the man who had beaten him down in the street.

The marshal's movements were studiedly deliberate; but they didn't fool Rick, who could see his face and could read it. Gliding toward Bellew's cell-door, Fenton extended his left hand, put the key in the lock without looking away from the tall cowman he had marked for death.

The released lock clicked; simultaneously the marshal's gun poked a tongue of flame at Rick Allison. The bullet snarled wide of its target and threw chips of adobe down Rick's neck; for, at the instant Fenton's trigger-finger flexed, Bellew pushed the unlocked door against the marshal, thereby destroying his aim.

Ab Fenton cried out, not in anger, but in deep and mortal pain. Rick had conjured the gun from the spring-holster at almost the same moment Fenton pulled trigger. His shot, roaring nearly as one with that of the marshal's Colt, did not miss. With lead lodged close to the region of his heart,

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Fenton thrust a hand behind him to grasp the cell-door for support. His legs were loose and wavering. He pulled the big Colt up to hip level for another try.

Bellew, sliding past the open door and letting it clang shut again with the weight of the lurching marshal, stooped at Fenton's left side and yanked the gun reposing in his other holster. The fact that Rick was armed amazed Bellew, no less than it had the dying marshal and Rick's pals. But the moment allowed only for action of a swift and deadly nature.

As Fenton's second shot was pumped at him, Rick lashed lead into the other's left side, where his heart still functioned erratically. Fenton, gasping, crashed down, his gun ringing as it fell on the stone floor. Through the acrid smoke, Rick saw Bellew's hate-contorted face appear over the marshal's shoulder. It seemed suddenly as if the marshal had come to life, was half erect on unsteady feet, his head rolling. But Rick knew that the shooting-mad Bellew had hooked a supporting arm around the dead man and was lifting him, so that his body sheltered the cow boss.

Rick dropped to one knee as the Flying C man cut loose with the six-shooter he had shoved out beneath the armpit of the dead marshal. The bullet tore through space recently filled by Allison's body, then ricocheted from the 'dobe wall at a dangerous angle for the blond cowman's pals. Rick went down on all fours and scrambled crabwise, intent on attaining a position from which he could drive lead to a vulnerable part of Lute Bellew's anatomy. Lead fired into the lifeless clay of Marshal Ab Fenton would be wasted lead—and Rick had but four bullets left in his thirty-eight.

The muzzle of the gun snatched by Bellew swung to blast smoky fire and lead at the agile Rick. Although falling short of him, the leaden slug rebounded from the stone floor and snarled in the cowboy's face, causing him to duck his head involuntarily. It was the tightest corner he had ever occupied. His life and the lives of his pals depended on his getting Bellew before Bronc Tally's henchman wrote his epitaph in smoke.

Rick hadn't counted on either of his presumably defenseless pals assisting in wiping out the menace of Bellew. Being the objective of Bellew's gunfire, he left it to the other two to save themselves if they could. He was puzzled when Bellew's six-shooter boomed again and the bullet neither struck him nor whistled its deadly refrain in earshot of him. Patently he was not the target aimed at!

Art Baker was responsible for the diversion. If Bellew hated him, Art cordially reciprocated the feeling. And from the moment that Marshal Fenton had let his six-shooter drop to the floor, Art had had his eye on it. Now, forgetful of the pain in his leg, he jumped forward and went down at full length on his stomach, judging that he could get that six-shooter in his fist before the desperately alert Bellew realized what he was about. But the Flying C gunman proved argus-eyed, as quick to shift and strike as a wildcat bayed by hounds. His pistol rapped a shot at the falling Baker, skimming the latter's head close enough to stir his curly black hair.

Art groaned realistically and lay quiet, right arm outflung, his fingers but inches from the coveted Colt. That groan caused Rick to go berserk, to cast aside caution. He leaped up and in from the side. One shoulder, bent arm, hip and thigh of the killer were exposed to Rick's aim. And as he sent lead smashing into Bellew's body, he knew a savage sort of exultation. He had never felt that way in taking human life, but never before had he known a man who needed killing as much as Luther Bellew.

Hit hard, Bellew did not cry out. He wasn't through yet. The leaping Allison saw the marshal's body toppling toward him through the haze of

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smoke. Bellew had shoved the human buffer in Rick's way, gun still spitting at the tall cowboy. His boot heels thudded in retreat, and he left a trail of crimson where he passed. His aim had been bad when he threw that last shot at Rick. Now, stumbling, cursing soddenly at Rick, and sidestepping the crashing figure of the late peace officer, he thumbed the hammer, aiming low.

"Beat—you—yet!" growled Bellew, somehow keeping his feet and lurching on toward the jail front. He did not seem to observe Joe Luce, who, unarmed and caught in a bad position, stood crouched on the balls of his feet by the wall, ready to dodge if that wavering gun muzzle of Bellew's should swing toward him.

Art Baker, saved by his own quick wit, awaiting a favorable moment to reveal that life wasn't extinct, suddenly grabbed Fenton's gun off the floor. He hitched his body around, rested elbows on the floor, drew bead on Bellew just as the man gained the door opening between corridor and office. Rick's gun spoke behind Art as he pulled trigger, the thunder of the weapons merging in a single blast.

Bellew bent from the middle, his head butting the door frame. Fire spewed innocuously from the Colt he gripped, lead striking stone and whining upward. It was his last trigger-pull! He fell on his back, drew up one leg, and was dead.

Rick slapped the hair out of his eyes and bent to seize Baker, Joe Luce springing forward to help.

"Shammin', pard, or did he get you somewhere?" Rick was asking.

Art denied that new injury had been inflicted. "Reckon it's a toss-up which of us got that murderer. I ain't killer-minded, not me, but beefin' a guy like him is pure pleasure."

Rick thought how well that coincided with his own feelings in regard to Bellew, but said nothing.

"I'd admire to know," Luce spoke, "where you got that thirty-eight from?"

"I didn't have a chance to tell you boys over at the hall; it's the spring-holster Colt I used when I was deputy sheriff. Lucky I was packin' it, for those handy boys sure had us in a jackpot." Rick glanced around through the smoke-filled corridor at Fenton's sprawled form. "I dunno how this is goin' to look to folks. Killin' the marshal may be hard to explain satisfactory. Listen! Hear all the people comin'?"

Sound of excited voices and running feet drifted in from the street. The three cowmen went forward to the marshal's office and were grouped about the latter's desk, Art seated in Fenton's swivel chair, when the vanguard of the crowd cautiously emerged from the night into the smoky lamplight. Among them was Eve, white-lipped, her features drawn with apprehension, and old man Tally, looking decidedly expectant—of what?

Rick, if not his pals, sought the face of Tally first of all, hoping to discover there telltale signs of his reaction to the scene in Fenton's office. Undoubtedly the old cattleman's expression turned sour for just an instant, his eyes dulled with disappointment, and very likely he cursed mentally. His step was heavy as he advanced to the middle of the floor; but his facial muscles were under control as he asked:

"What all's been goin' on, boys? Where's the marshal?"

Rick thumbed toward the cell-room. "In there—where he tried to kill us with the help of that trouble-makin' Bellew."

All eyes had been focused on the doorway as Rick jabbed the air with his thumb. The inert body of Lute Bellew, seen for the first time, was cause for a concerted murmuring in the crowd. Eve Cathcart glanced quickly away, her gaze coming to rest on Rick. Her eyes conveyed a message of heartfelt relief and something more. She moved closer, bestowing smiles on

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Art and Joe, who had looked at practically no one else since she had entered the room.

"Boys," she said, her rich contralto rising above the buzz of excited conversation, "you haven't given us much of an explanation yet, but we know some things from another source which make it easy to guess what happened here. Your friend, Jack Dodd, got a knife wound in the back which nearly finished him."

The three young cowmen said, "Dodd!" in a single breath. Was Dodd in the plot against them?

Eve hastened to dispel their doubt; told how she had found Dodd badly wounded in the alley by the town hall, how he had regained consciousness as men carried him inside; had detained her to recite in broken phrases what had happened, detained her when the girl was on edge to be off to the jail. But she was glad she had stayed to listen.

"What Dodd said showed up our town marshal in fine style," Eve said, the red curve of her lips thinning out. "Jack went out on the stoop for a smoke. He hadn't yet lighted his cigarette, but was standing there in shadow when he noticed a man slipping along past the bank building, as if he meant to duck into the alley. Recognizing that man as Marshal Fenton, Jack was mightily interested.

"When Fenton went up the alley, Jack, wondering at his stealth, swung over the side railing and groped along after him. He heard a voice—not the marshal's nor one he recognized, though there was something familiar about it. It was saying, 'Here's the irons to be fastened on those fellows' saddles—don't you botch the job.' Fenton made some reply and started cautiously back up the alley.

"Dodd didn't understand what was up exactly, but he's keen and he suspected a plot against you boys. He hugged the wall, holding his breath, while Fenton got by him, heading for the plaza. He waited a bit longer, listening for sounds behind him which might indicate whether or not the other party was still in the alley. Finally, hearing nothing, he concluded the man had gone out the other end, and started toward the front, anxious to see what Fenton was doing with those irons.

"Then with a rush somebody was on Jack from behind, somebody in sock feet, he's sure, as otherwise he would have had some warning of attack. A knife was jabbed into his back. He didn't even have a chance to cry out before he was down and dead to the world. I reckon," concluded Eve Cathcart, "that whoever gave the running irons to the marshal must have discovered Jack in the alley right after Fenton left, removed his boots and started to creep like a cat—"

"Jack knows now what it was all about?" Rick was guilty of interrupting.

She nodded. "He only wishes that he could put a name to the man who met Fenton in the alley."

"So do I!" Allison stated in a hard voice. He did not look at Tally, for he knew the old cattleman would be entire master of himself now. Rick grinned crookedly. "I reckon nobody thinks we're cattle rustlers after this; and nobody can raise a howl because Mr. Fenton's lousy soul hit the one-way trail. I had to kill him or be killed—and Bellew got into the game at the end, turned loose by Fenton. Seems we were to be shot and when folks said 'Howcome?' Fenton was to claim we attempted a breakaway."

Bronc Tally came to stand beside Eve, stroking his white beard. "Two bad ones gone, boys. Glad you're on top and cleared. I was kind of disbelievin' the evidence of them runnin' irons anyway. Looks as if Ab had been in cahoots with Bellew right along, lettin' him loose to get you fellows, then, when that failed, puttin' over a fast one with the irons to get you in jail and in shootin' range of Bellew. Fenton knowed he didn't dass let his prisoner go footloose again; I was here

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once before tonight and saw to it—"

"So Eve was tellin'," broke in Rick, his crooked grin appearing once more. "Accordin' to the way you figure it, Bellew and Fenton must've been great buddies; but that don't explain the third party, who gave Fenton the irons. Who was he?"

Bronc spread his palms, shrugged shoulders still big and powerful. "*Quien sabe?* Always saddle tramps who've burnt a brand hangin' around towns like this. And Fenton would know 'em. By the way, how did you chance to have a gun hangin' on you, Rick?"

"It wasn't chance, it was a hunch made me wear it." He opened his coat to show the black butt curving from the spring-holster under his left arm. His smile spread and his glance went to Eve then back to Tally. "Lucky I played that hunch, wasn't it?"

Bronc said, "You bet!" heartily.

CHAPTER IX

Flaming Range

RICK ALLISON was awakened by a pounding of hoofs under his window and the shout of "Fire!" It was the night following the dance at Buckner's Crossing, that night of crowded events which none who was present, would soon forget. Rick bounced from his cot, ran to the window, his bare feet thudding on the carpetless floor. Heck Denver, one of his punchers, sat below, and as soon as Rick's leonine blond head appeared, Denver opened up with the dire news that fire was running wild in the southwest pasture.

"It got a hell of a long start of us, boss," Heck said worriedly. "Night guard that waked us said it just seemed to pop up sudden along a quarter-mile front like a match had been touched to a powder train. Shore, the grass ain't that tinder-dry. But anyway, you bet it's a-flamin' fierce in this wind. Foreman had a coupla breeders shot and skinned, to use straddlin' the fire, and sent me down for the wagon and some water barrels. I've got the cook loadin' barrels at the barn right now."

"Heck, I wouldn't be surprised if powder had been spilled across the grass to fire it quick!" Rick declared savagely, his clenched fist striking the window-sill. "It ain't just happenchance, this business. Don't wait for me; go help cookie with the barrels, pick up your water at Vinegaroon and keep on to the fire. I'll be along *pronto.*"

He jerked back from the window and Heck raced his lathered horse to the barn. The cook, laboring in trousers and undershirt, had the last of the rainwater barrels loaded in the chuck wagon and was climbing up to his seat. Rick heard them clatter away toward Vinegaroon Creek while hastily getting into his clothes. He circled his waist with a gun-laden, cartridge-filled belt as he sprang out of the house and sped for the saddle-stock corral.

He had glanced at his watch and found it to be three-thirty in the morning. The fire-setters—he was sure in his own mind that the conflagration was no accident, but the work of his enemies at the Flying C—had loosed the red-tongued demon of destruction at a time when the punchers on the range would be sleeping the most soundly and the night guard more or less drowsy.

Since he was in a hurry, of course things went wrong with the young cowman when he started to catch up a horse. There were five broncs in the enclosure, and the one he had selected to ride proved most elusive when he got busy with the catch-rope hung on the gate post. Once, twice, three times the loop slithered loosely from the dodging horse's neck, as all five milled crazily around the exasperated rancher. Finally his loop snaked true and the horse stood still.

It must have been twenty minutes after Heck had left with the wagon when Rick was ready to head for the grazing area where the fire raged. He

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did not spare the spurs once he had mounted. From the first ridge beyond the ranch buildings he was able to see the ominous red of the night sky, down where his men were fighting to save good grass. Even the cattle might be threatened by the fire, though Rick judged the stock had been drifted safely out of its path, since Heck Denver hadn't mentioned the herd was in any danger.

Rick's blood was strumming in his veins, and tensity of emotion had made of his face a grim, fighting mask. As he rode along, Rick wasn't expecting to encounter enemies; but suddenly three horsemen pounded up the far side of a slight rise and lunged on toward him at a pace manifesting no small degree of anxiety to shake the dust of the neighborhood.

Instantly the young rancher whipped forth his gun. He could have but little doubt that they were raiders, the very men who had started the fire to burn him out. They were late in getting away from the scene, possibly had been obliged to lie low, watching their chance of escape, when the fire-fighting Allison waddies became active. To make doubly certain that those approaching were not friends, Rick yelled, "Sing out, fellows!" and wheeled directly across the course of their northward flight.

The voice of Allison issuing forth from the curtain of night, together with the ominous staccato of his leaping horse, warned the raiders that all the enemies they had to fear were not behind and outdistanced. There was no singing out; brief silence, except for the ground-quickening drum of hoofs, followed his call to the flying riders. With the glow of the distant fire behind them, Rick easily discerned the swing of their gun arms, and instantly shots were crashing in his general direction.

If only Bronc Tally were one of the three, thought Rick, but as far as he could tell in the dark, the old cowman was not there. Rick let drive as the others whipped up their guns. He was riding hard and this jogged his extended gun arm, but he saw one of the pelting horsemen sway as if struck, when his Colt belched flame. Yes! the fellow was hit, leaning forward now, as if hard put to it to maintain his balance in the saddle. His gun had stopped hurling lead at the indistinct form of the rancher, too!

But the wounded man kept pace with his companions, who drew nearer in swift leaps. Pulling on the reins to slacken his own mount's headlong running, Rick found the roan had gone wild and wasn't immediately responsive. The young cowman's intention was to stop and steady his aim, not only wound the galloping riders but sift them clean out of saddles. He felt inclined to no halfway measures with men from the Flying C. A bullet tore his tight-fitting Stetson loose, but did not quite knock it off his head; another slug ripped the shoulder-seam of his shirt.

Meanwhile the actions of his horse and the fact that his head was inescapably thrust into a leadstorm, all reacted to the detriment of Rick's usually lethal aim. He pulled trigger at desperate speed, trying to keep the flaming muzzle of the gun depressed so as to hit the hard-riding targets low down. A choking cry of pain from one of those still upright in the saddle left no doubt in Rick's mind that his bullet had lodged in the fellow's chest or abdomen. Yet the hard-hit rider did not fall, but stuck burr-like to the leather as had the first raider Rick had wounded.

They went by him in a flurry of dust and powder smoke, a shot from the outlaw as yet untouched by Rick's singing lead, drawing blood from the young cattleman's right ear. Rick found himself suddenly with an empty gun in his hand as he quickly unshipped toes from the stirrups and ran around behind the plunging roan, reins wrapped around left hand and wrist. He had no desire to see his mount ripped up by a bullet,

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but the circumstances permitted him no choice.

He fervently hoped the marauders would miss the roan, as he and his mount were cavorting in unison, executing a sort of waltz as the horse made attempts to break away and the cowman danced with the excited beast to keep sheltered. Meanwhile bullets were punching the air and skipping along the sod in a constant threat of death. Both horse and rider came through unscratched, however, for the trio Rick had encountered were more intent on fading into the distance than finishing the grim argument with the dismounted rider.

With the dwindling thud of their mounts' hoofs in his ears, Rick quieted his roan, trailed the reins on the ground and set about reloading his six-shooter. He was disgusted that the night riders had got by him, and he intended to follow and rub them out. This was his big chance to prove the double-dealing Tally, who was so paternal-looking, truly "infernal" under his hide, as Jack Dodd had long ago assured Rick.

Rick, in the circumstances, had no hesitation in turning his back on the prairie fire, knowing his riders would do all that human agency could to combat it. He might never have such another opportunity to fasten the guilt for that fire on Bronc Tally, if he failed to run those men down now. He sprang into the saddle now, turned the roan's head and gradually worked the animal back into its long running stride, leaning to catch the sounds made by the men fleeing ahead of him. He could not see them because of intervening ridges and far-flung clumps of chaparral.

But the chase ended before he had covered a mile on the back-trail. Jolting forward suddenly, the roan somersaulted and Rick was piled hard yards away. Dizzily he sat up in the grass, glancing toward his horse, which was trying to rise and whinnying piteously. It had dropped a forehoof into a doghole. Collecting his wits and cursing such ill luck, Rick got up and approached the suffering beast. The horse stopped struggling as his hand was laid caressingly along its neck. Rick stooped and felt of the break.

"I reckon it's the bullet route, pal," he muttered huskily. "We've traveled many a range mile together, you and me; but this is the end for you! Sorry, pal."

He pulled his gun and leaned forward. The explosion and the heavy sigh of his four-footed friend made Rick Allison shiver. Now the cowman could no longer hear the retreating hoofbeats as he stripped off the riding-gear. He was much nearer the fire than the ranch house, and so, saddle on hip, he started trudging toward the flaming southwest pasture in order to secure another mount. His thoughts were bitter indeed, all focusing on Bronc Tally, whose luck tonight had held even better than usual.

It was the better part of two miles he was obliged to cover to the scene of the fire. Light was already breaking in the east, but it was as yet pale compared to the illumination provided by that range-destroying demon. A smoke-blackened Heck Denver, minus eyebrows, rode up from the flaming zone when Rick paused on a hummock to survey the activities and gauge the progress of the battle.

"Where'n hell you been, boss?" Heck peered down from his fourteen hand horse. "And you're aground—why?"

"Run into the skunks who set this fire," Rick replied, and briefly recounted the fight and what had occurred subsequently. "But for the roan breakin' a leg in that damn' doghole, three Flyin' C men would be cold meat now—or I'd be!"

Long before, Heck Denver and the outfit cook had arrived with the water barrels filled at Vinegaroon Creek, and wet saddle blankets, tied to rope ends, were being dragged by mounted punchers across the edges of the fire zone. The well soaked blankets took the place of blood-dripping cowskins in

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wetting down unfired grass and here Rick's foreman had displayed his good judgment, for bulls and young heifers, breeding stock, came high, too high to be sacrificed for this purpose.

Rick joined the group dipping their blankets afresh at the wagon, borrowed a horse and put a saddle blanket to soak. He asked what had been done, while the smoke rolled and billowed about them.

"Everythin's been done," his foreman replied, his voice rasping from the effect of the smoke. "We tried straddlin' the first fire, but it got away from us, what with the drivin' wind. I wanted to keep from startin' a backfire if I could, knowin' how the second fire sometimes gets out of hand, along with the first. We're comin' through, boss. That backfire is behavin' fine, with the boys keepin' the grass wet to windward of it."

"You and the boys sure know your job." Rick coughed from the smoke as he talked. "There'll be somethin' extra in every man's pay envelope account of this."

He went off with the others, his lariat trailing out with the drag of a water-weighted blanket. He soon was lost in the smoke, and fought his bolting horse with the spurs to force it up to the fire line. A wet neckerchief was tied over nose and mouth. No man could remain long at a stretch in such close proximity to that intense heat. But through squinting, watery eyes he discerned that the wind-driven flames were not gaining. His fire-fighting crew had been successful in confining the raging demon within a certain area.

He made two trips to the wagon, where the water supply was running low. Daylight had come. The smoke still wreathed and billowed heavily, but was far less deeply tinged with crimson, showing how the flames it partly screened were losing their fierce, destructive power. The grass the fire had fed on had nearly burned out. The steady roaring was slipping away to a low hum.

That dense smoke lasted a while, then broke before a thrusting wind, dissipating it into long spirals. The blackened, tortured earth still radiated intense heat, and small fires continued to burn in gullies and little ravines. The last of the water was gone, and the cowboys circled the vast burned area, many of them scorched, but thinking nothing of it. Salt of the earth, those fellows; and Rick was proud of his breed and grateful to them, too. They had saved his range and his cattle from one of the worst menaces to ranch life.

Having done what he could to help in the comparatively short time he had been at the fire, Rick, reeking of smoke, heedless of several small burns, rode toward the wagon. The thunder of hoofs traveling out of the north drew his gaze in that direction, and he tensed when he saw Bronc Tally, as the latter approached with what appeared to be half the Flying C outfit at his back. An attack?

Rick spur-pricked his tired, singed horse into a lope, in order to get back to the wagon before the Flying C crew arrived.

"Want me to call in the boys?" the cook inquired as Rick drew up, while the hammering hoofs of Tally's mob drew closer.

"Wait!" Rick told him.

He sat like a figure of bronze, slowly pulling the heat-dried neckerchief down from his face. Bronc Tally didn't have the look of one seeking war as he came up at a dwindling run, halting his horse so that its muzzle almost touched the muzzle of Allison's mount.

"Rick, I see we got here too late to help, but fortunately it's all right!" greeted Bronc. "Would 'a' been here sooner, but it was only just before daylight that one of my men—the cook, in fact—happened to see a fire blazin' down this way. I knowed it must be your range, so I got the boys together. And here we are. You're lucky you ain't smoked clean out. Cattle saved?"

"Yeah." Rick was staring with an expression of the eyes which Tally

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could not mistake. "I didn't know you could see a fire down here from your place. It's low down on the valley floor. Be more likely my pals would see it and come a-runnin', but they didn't."

Bronc cleared his throat. "How'd it start?"

"Three men," said Rick tersely.

"Oh, you saw 'em, then?" No perturbation in Tally's voice at all.

"Yeah." Rick continued to stare.

"Boy," said Tally, shifting his big body in the saddle, "I can see it in your eyes that you figure I'm behind this. You figure I'm still your enemy, though makin' peace sign when we meet. You wrong me!"

"Yeah?" retorted Rick again, thinking it would be a service to justice to throw his gun and kill the white-bearded old hellion.

"Ride over here a minute," Tally directed, urging his horse out of earshot of his glum-looking men, and Rick followed, prepared for anything. "Now," said Tally, "you say you saw the three fire-setters. Who were they? Men of mine?"

Rick sensed that a lie wouldn't help. "I saw 'em and I fought 'em, but I didn't recognize 'em. My cards are on the table; put yours down or kick the table over!"

Amusement flickered an instant in Bronc's blue-gray eyes, then he became deadly serious. "Tryin' to take the old man off guard, eh? Why, I'm more your friend than some others in this country that you'd swear by. I knowed you hadn't seen them night riders to recognize them, or you'd be over at Art Baker's place, settlin' up."

Rick listened with gaze growing dark. "Go on!"

"I hate to say it, knowin' how you and Baker and Luce have stuck together in the past. But—love for a woman will bust up any combination of men. Don't look mad, boy. This is gospel truth, and my boys'll swear to it as well. Baker's north line, as you know, borders on our south line, and it was breakin' day as we headed for your place. We noticed three fellows, two of 'em kinda limp in the saddle, ridin' toward Baker's. They saw us and raced their fagged broncs to get into a hollow, out of sight. But they wasn't so quick we didn't see their faces good, for all of a minute or two. One was Art Baker, the others was punchers of his!"

"You lie!" snarled Rick. "Why in God's name would Baker try to burn me out, me, his best friend except Joe Luce?"

"To make you quit the valley and give him a free hand with Eve," Tally replied steadily, neither the epithet nor Rick's fury seeming to move him. "He's got a high-lifed temper, as quick to hate as to love, I reckon. He feels you've got the inside track with Eve—and you have. Now he's failed to destroy your range and stock, I dunno what he'll do; but I'm warnin' you as a friend to watch out sharp!"

Rick called himself seven different kinds of a fool for even listening to such stuff. Why Art and he. . . . But his racing, hot thoughts could not toss aside a small lingering doubt. Art and Joe both loved Eve, he knew; and, come to think of it, he had wondered before this if rivalry for Eve's hand would ultimately sever their friendship. He had resolved that he himself would not be a poor loser. But could he be as certain of the reactions of Art, the hot-tempered—or even of Joe, with his red-headed nature? They were men of intense likes and dislikes.

He glanced probingly into Tally's eyes, but did not speak.

"Why don'tcha go over to Baker's place and question him?" Tally suggested. "You don't have to take my word for anything. Maybe you'll discover evidence that'll open your eyes. You fought them night riders, you said?"

"Yep. Hit two of 'em, I reckon."

"Look for a couple of wounded stock hands. Or maybe Art was one you hit, who knows? And horses that have been

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ridden down recent, look for them. I'm for you, Rick. I want you to get Eve for a wife."

"Tally, if this is another of your tricks, I'll kill you!" Rick ground out, swinging his horse's head about.

"I'm trickin' nobody any more," Bronc assured him; then screwed around in the saddle to watch Rick spur into a headlong gallop toward Baker's ranch. He grabbed a handful of beard and stroked it, while a feral light crept into his eyes.

CHAPTER X

Sixgun Settlement

RICK dismounted at Art's saddle-stock corral. The ride over had cooled his brain. He was thinking that Tally must be working some new trick, for Art couldn't possibly be to blame for that range fire. Then his gaze, wandering over the few horses in the enclosure, spied three on whose coats the lathered dust of hard traveling had dried. Rick batted his eyes, genuinely amazed, but he did not go off the handle. They were Art's horses, all right, wearing Art's brand on the shoulder.

Grounding his reins, Rick walked toward the house. Art opened the front door and hobbled out, greeting him friendlywise, but showing traces of anger, too. They met at the little porch, sat on the steps, one above the other. Rick got out the makings, finding no voice to answer immediately Art's query as to why he was there so early.

"You look sore," Rick finally replied. "Anything wrong?"

"I'll say so! Somebody crept in about dawn and shot up my two boys that were sleepin' in the bunkhouse. One guess is that it's Tally up to his dirty tricks again!"

This information startled Rick and he studied Art over the smoke-curling tip of his cigarette, hooking up a knee in clasped hands. Art was not dissembling; the dark eyes were hot with ire, but honest ire. Rick felt as if a great weight, that had been bearing down unmercifully, were lifted from his chest.

"The boys ain't dead?" he asked. "Well, that's lucky. Did you know three of your broncs had been rode to a frazzle last night?"

Art's eyes widened. "No! Who rode 'em and why?"

"Pardner," said Rick earnestly, "Bronc Tally is, as you say, up to his old tricks again. In fact, he's never stopped playin' them. Every other card he's played has failed, so he aims to get us at each other's throats through jealousy over Eve. My range was on fire last night, rather this mornin'—and that was Bronc's first move!"

Art was staring hard, too stunned at the moment for speech. Rick launched into an abbreviated account of all that had occurred on his own range, from the moment Heck Denver had brought word of the fire, up until Rick had had his talk with Tally and ridden off for Baker's. Art's eyes gleamed anew, and his jaw muscles twitched, as he listened. Rick did not regard these as signs of animosity toward him; but suddenly Art reached back to his hip, hauled out his big gun and shoved the muzzle against Rick's chest, thumb crooking the hammer back.

"Mean to tell me," rasped Art in a rage-choked voice, "that you'd believe, even for a half second, I'd do you dirt thataway? You did believe it, and I oughta kill you!"

Rick sat perfectly still and calm. He was very near to death at the hand of his friend.

"Shoot, if you feel it'll satisfy you any," spoke Rick. "I wouldn't altogether blame you, though it's just what Tally is hopin' for. I did half believe you might have done the thing, Art, knowin' you love Eve same as I do, and same as Joe does—knowin', too, that you go off half-cocked, hog-wild sometimes. But before you drop that hammer I want you to realize how low and mean I feel for havin' had them notions. I was worked up, pardner. . . ."

Art's gun clattered on the step. He

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ran fingers through his thick black curls and cursed. "What damn fools we both are, playin' into that old hellion's hands. You're right, I love Eve with all my heart—but I'll win her fair or not at all. She's the one to settle it." His long arm stretched down, hand clamping Rick's shoulder as the latter squatted two steps below. "Think of me pullin' a gun on you—my pal! I guess I saw red."

"I understand," Rick grasped Art's arm, held his fingers there tightly. "The score between us is wiped out; and Tally is in for plenty trouble. He couldn't help noticin' how all three of us want Eve, and when you fellows got a little snorty the way the race ended last week, it must have given him ideas to fall back on. He worked it pretty slick last night, havin' his men swipe horses from your corral, to be returned after the fire was started, so's I would find 'em here in a lather. A little addition to the program was necessary, uh course, because I happened to cut the trail of his men. I wounded two; so Tally had one of his gun-slingers Injun up to your bunkhouse and rap lead into them boys of yours, to round out the proof of what he told me about seein' you a-horse this mornin'. He was stakin' all on the chance I'd be too mad to believe your story, see? Reckon the Flyin' C's whole bunch was ridin' around all night, one place and another. Wonder if Joe had any trouble? He'll be due for some, sure."

But Joe Luce rode in half an hour later. His man had reported seeing smoke down on Rick's range, and Joe had gone to investigate. He was just in from a bee-line ride from Rick's. No, he said, answering Rick's question, he hadn't seen Tally and his men, on Rick's range or elsewhere—and there'd been no attack at his ranch. When acquainted fully with old Bronc's newest efforts to get them out of Breakneck Valley or bury them under its sod, Joe Luce blew up and swore he'd braid a fancy bridle out of Tally's scalp.

While they talked, noontime arrived. The two wounded riders, able to sit horses, had long since gone off to Buckner's Crossing, to have the doctor attend their injuries. The three friends pitched in together to prepare a lunch, and while they were eating, a horse stopped in the dooryard. Eve Cathcart walked into the house, smiling as she greeted them, but immediately after waxing serious. She put aside her white Stetson, drew off her buckskin gloves and sat down at the table, but would have nothing to eat. She just wasn't hungry. Rick noticed that she wore a gun, the first time he had ever seen her carry a weapon; and his steady glance at the walnut butt curving from her holster caught her attention.

"Yes," she nodded, as if he had spoken. "I feel that I may have use for this sometime soon. And if I must use it, I can."

"What's in the package, if I'm not too nosey?" Joe Luce asked. She had a brown paper parcel in her lap.

Unconsciously dramatic, the ranch girl put the package on the table, broke the string, saying, "This is the record of a thoroughly bad hombre, Dan Kingman alias Bronc Tally!"

The three young men did not stir.

Eve glanced around, said, "I reckon you're more surprised than you're admitting. Boys, I've been suspicious of Tally since that running-iron business of night before last. I know now, as well as if he'd signed a full confession, that he murdered my father to get control of the Flying C. He's the coyote who shot from behind, and I believe Dad knew it before he died, even though he signed over half his property and the ranch agreement to Tally."

"Why?" Rick asked bluntly. "Why would your father make a will in favor of a man he knew was his murderer?"

"To protect me," she returned tensely. "Oh, I've figured it out: I was at school then, you'll remember, and Tally must have told my dying Dad he'd do something to me when I came

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home, unless he wrote the will that way. And Tally, or Kingman, was cunning enough not to ask for all the ranch, as that would have looked queer to people. I'd naturally be the one to inherit all or part of it."

"Good head work, girl!" Rick's fist smote the table. "There ain't a weak link in that figurin'. What say, boys? But, Eve, what else? How do you know Tally's right name is Kingman?"

She had the package open and skimmed an age-worn sheriff's dodger across the table. "Look at the face of that man. Read his description, wanted in three states and ten counties for cattle stealing, stage hold-ups and killings. It's Tally when he was somewhat younger and shows no beard, of course; but you put on the beard, which he's grown as a disguise, and Kingman becomes Tally. And look here!"

She flipped several more reward notices, all fairly old, within reach of their eager eyes and fingers. "Luther Bellew, Ab Fenton, Loop Marston, Jim Cochise and several others who work as punchers out at our ranch. All but Fenton are considerably younger than Kingman, but all were evidently members of his gang before it broke up. They all came together again in Breakneck Valley when Tally, or Kingman, sent out the rallying call to wherever they were in hiding."

"Holy cow!" Joe Luce exclaimed excitedly. "This sure puts the deadwood on that wild bunch. No wonder hell's been loose in the valley. But how—uh—how does your dad figure in it?"

Eve tapped a slender forefinger against a small packet of letters she had uncovered. "Here are letters exchanged between Dad and Dan Kingman. Kingman must have taken those he sent to Dad when he went through Dad's desk, after his death. It seems that in their younger days, both rode the range as cowpunchers. These letters were written only six years ago, but they speak of that early friendship. Kingman had gone to the bad, when still in his twenties; Dad took the straight trail and prospered.

"Kingman, locating him six years ago, wrote Dad and asked if they couldn't get together again. Said he had reformed, but needed a friend and a job. Big-hearted Dad couldn't refuse, told him to come on. Kingman came—as Tally. He was afraid to use his own name, and Dad must've agreed it would be unwise. Then I went away to school.

"A telegram announcing Dad's death recalled me. I found many things changed, among them the riders' personnel. Now I know that the rustling gang that bothered the valley were Kingman's wild bunch, whom he took on as ranch hands after killing Dad. To be sure to have things his own way, he saw to it somehow that Ab Fenton wore the marshal's star at the Crossing. Well . . . aren't you surprised a little bit?"

"Throwed hard, and I didn't reckon I could be!" Luce admitted. The others' faces expressed the same thoughts Joe had put into speech.

"Almighty clever of you, Eve, to find out all this." Rick fingered the reward notices. "I reckon we know who stuck a knife in Jack Dodd now, though I wasn't doubtin' much from the first. Tally—or Kingman—carries a Barlow knife, don't he? And the fellow gave orders to Fenton not to botch the job, didn't he? It was Tally, sure. He went to the jail to arrange for the marshal to meet him in the alley. How did you find these dodger notices, Eve? Been rummagin' in old Unc' Henry's room, I betcha!"

"Just that," Eve nodded. "Here's the way it came about: I went to our blacksmith shop this morning to mend the shank of a spur; suddenly I heard voices just outside the shop, and I caught the word 'doctor.' I tiptoed to the cobwebby window to listen. They were talking about getting a doctor for those two men you shot last night on the trail. Oh, I know about the fire and all the rest of it, for I

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eavesdropped shamelessly. Nobody suspected I was there, and Bronc Tally had just come back from your range, saying he hoped to hear the report that you and Art had shot each other—over me!"

"So you know it all, even that?" Rick reddened slightly, and stole sidelong glances at Art and Joe.

"Yes, even that part." She had flushed, too, and it was a moment or two before she went on. "Tally has schemed cunningly to turn you boys against one another. He's gone to the Crossing this afternoon for—what do you think? Arsenic to poison Joe's big water-hole! He's planned that if you, Rick or Art, survived the meeting this morning, that he'll wait for Joe to find dead cattle around the water-hole and claim he saw one of you at the spot, dumping the arsenic in the water.

"Oh, he's terribly cunning! The storekeeper where he'll buy the arsenic would be afraid to open his mouth afterward."

"I take it you went to his room and rummaged for evidence after he'd left for town, so's you'd not be interrupted?" Rick questioned.

"Yes. I slipped back to the house, watched for him to go. What really started me searching his room was the fact that while I was listening in the blacksmith shop, one of the men called him 'Kingman,' and got plenty cussed out. Said I to myself, there ought to be something or other in that old scoundrel's room to throw light on this mystery. It's funny how a man will hold onto such things as those wanted notices for keepsakes." She paused, tucked in a ravishing tendril of blue-black hair.

Rick glanced again at the gun she wore. "You came right here to Art's because of what Tally said! Now, about that smoker," he asked, "are you wearin' it to avenge your daddy?"

She hesitated. "I could do it and never feel a twinge of conscience afterward, I really believe!"

"Sure, but we'll be glad to take the job off your hands!" her shooting suitors chorused.

Half an hour later they were riding to Buckner's Crossing. Eve had tucked the reward notice for Dan Kingman, alias Bronc Tally, into the breast pocket of her mannish blue shirt; the other dodgers and letters found among Tally's effects were in her saddle-pouch. It was mid-afternoon when they jogged down the Crossing's main stem and saw the Flying C horses tied to the rack of the Friendly Glass Saloon. As the four got down and crossed the sidewalk boards, Rick said quietly, "We'll make a bold front, friends, but be ready to burn powder."

Glancing at the girl, he saw her color rise, but otherwise she showed no trace of excitement. He knew that she would do to side a man in any kind of trouble. And somehow he did not feel afraid for her, though she had become near and dear to him.

Consciously or not, it was a fact that, as he passed through the batwing doors of the big saloon, Rick moved so as to shield the girl with his body. Art and Joe pushed in behind them, stopped dead, glances roving. The barroom was empty of patrons. But a murmur of voices drifted out of the private card room at the rear. The single bartender on duty at that hour looked a trifle pallid when he saw them; they looked so solemn and evidently bent on trouble, even the girl. It was something unusual to see her packing a gun like a man.

"Tally and the boys in back?" Rick asked, and the bartender's voice wasn't steady as he answered:

"The boys—not Tally. He's in the store next door."

"Go get him," Rick turned to Art and Joe. "Just say I want to see him in here. I'll have a word with the men while you're gone."

"I'm staying with you, Rick," Eve declared, showing the first sign of nervousness. Rick didn't wonder at it, for in a few moments she would be face to

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face with the murderer of her father.

No sooner had the swing doors flapped at the backs of Baker and Luce than a hatless Flying C cowboy pushed into the barroom through that rear door. He didn't notice the cowman and the girl standing in the middle of the barroom at first and addressed the drink mixer:

"Gimme another deck of cards, Jere—"

The fellow was one of those whose hawk-like features were reproduced on the reward notices in Eve's possession, and Rick made a step forward, spur chains rasping. The puncher outlaw glanced around. He looked surprised as he said:

"Hello, Miss Eve! What you doin' in here?"

"We're waitin' for Kingman to come from next door, Tip McCann," Rick spoke, remembering the name on the sheriff's dodger. "Yeah, we know who you really are, Tally and all the rest. If you'll give up your gun quietly—"

Tip McCann didn't ask how they knew; that they did so was proof enough that he and his fellow outlaws were in a tight place. He shouted, "Hank! Larry!" and grabbed his gun, slinging it from the holster smoking. The bullet punched through a lithograph on the wall behind Rick and Eve. Two men sprang from that rear room, weapons bared. They had overheard Rick's speech and scarcely needed Tip's summons to bring them on the run. Rick had his gun out, was firing before the reinforcements arrived, and the gun arm of McCann flopped at his side, with the bone shattered.

Eve was raising her gun to throw a shot at the nearest of the two new arrivals, aiming low for a leg, when out of the corner of her eye she detected unusual activity on the bartender's part. The ranch girl wheeled just as he whipped a bottle off the back bar to hurl it at Allison, whose attention was centered on the two agate-eyed outlaws who had rushed to McCann's support. Eve's gun cracked. The bottle plunged from the swinging arm of the bartender; but it landed far short of its mark, and the fellow gripped a reddened shirt sleeve and howled like a hurt dog.

The crash of weapons was roaring through the barroom, seeming to shake the Friendly Glass to its foundations. A smoke fog was forming around the principals in the gunplay . . . cries arose, there was the jar of a falling body . . . another thud of toppling flesh . . . a man called shrilly, "I cave—you got me bad—in the ribs!"

It was over almost as quickly as it had started. Eve, who had fired only one shot, grew cold when she saw Rick's big figure apparently sagging. She put forth a hand blindly, touching his shoulder. He straightened at the touch, but did not turn. His eyes, filled with a cold sort of fury, were fixed on the three figures revealed as the smoke dissipated. Two on the floor, stretched flat on backs and motionless; the third man on his feet, bent over, hand holding his side.

Before Rick could speak his mind, muffled shooting broke loose in the store next door. Then, out in the street, Tally's voice could be heard shouting. Eve turned and sped on light feet doorward.

"Careful!" Rick called as he followed after her. He himself was careful not to present his back as a target for the Flying C outlaw left behind alive, though the man probably hadn't much fight in him now.

Rick stepped out of the saloon just as Eve's voice reached him, shrilly crying:

"Don't you touch me! Where's Baker and Luce?"

Allison saw Eve dodge the reaching arm of old Bronc Tally, who was running toward the Friendly Glass, his coat skirts a-flap in the wind, looking as wild and red-eyed as that Brahma bull from which Rick had rescued Eve —and Tally's six-shooters were in his hands! There was no sign of Baker and Luce, however, and Rick wondered

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for a fearful moment if the old gun-throwing outlaw had killed his pals. Certainly there had been a slip-up somewhere; Tally had suspected the cards were running against him when the boys entered the store. That gun-play in the saloon told its own tale, too.

At sight of Rick emerging from the Friendly Glass, Tally halted in mid-stride and apparently forgot the white-faced girl. His guns were lowered, but Rick knew they would jerk up and vomit fire when a certain name passed his lips. Rick thought himself prepared for the inevitable climax of flashing guns, yet he had overlooked one vital thing at the height of the excitement—had forgotten to reload his forty-five after the fight in the saloon.

"I told you this mornin' that if I found you'd tricked me, I'd kill you—Dan Kingman!" Rick expected the old outlaw to show surprise at the utterance of that infamous name. But the white-haired Kingman with his deceitful Santa Claus beard didn't move or bat an eye. He said slowly:

"You found the sheriff's dodger with my pitcher—the girl found it! You couldn't know otherwise. Well, I'm the big high-boy, all right!"

Then the killer light blazed in the blue-gray eyes; the guns swept up, as Rick knew they would. He flipped his own smoke-iron forward, thumbing the hammer, and it fell with an ominous click. He went cold to the marrow.

One of Kingman's bullets had dusted his left shoulder, the other missed him entirely; but the next brace of shots was not likely to duplicate the performance. Even as he cursed his carelessness, Rick dived groundward. He had a glimpse of smoke blurring the able hands of Kingman before he struck the dust on his shoulder and rolled. High over him droned the slugs, for Kingman, alias Tally, had not expected that sudden attack.

Spectators were peering cautiously from inside buildings and around convenient corners. Still there was no sign of Art and Joe, to succor Rick in his desperate plight. But Eve Cathcart met the emergency. She would have killed Kingman for the man she loved and because she firmly believed him the killer of her father, but feared that her first shot might not stop the desperate old badman. There would certainly be no time for her to drag trigger twice.

With quick wit she called, "Kingman, you killed Dad—from ambush! Now you're murdering this boy—his gun's empty!"

She knew it mattered nothing to Kingman that his enemy lying in the street was defenseless; but she knew also that the sound of her voice, and the accusation she made, should cause the killer's attention to waver, if only an instant, from his latest victim—and it did! The glaring, bloodshot eyes of Kingman stared into hers. In his mind he gloated; he had already killed one man loved by this girl, and was in a position to slay another just as mercilessly.

"Sure I bushed your Dad, sure!" he roared. "He wouldn't take me in as a ranch partner, so he lost all!"

Eve hardly heard him. On the instant that she had Kingman's attention diverted, the girl flung her six-shooter. It landed within three inches of Rick's stabbing right hand. He scooped it up and faced the old outlaw, half lifting himself on outstretched left arm. The cowboy rancher drilled Dan Kingman between the eyes and slowly rose to his feet, while the other man was falling to the dust, where he sprawled in the dirt street. One bullet had been enough.

EVE stood in the shelter of Rick's long, powerful arms as a crowd burst upon the scene, Art and Joe tumbling out of the merchandise store, looking groggy yet anxious. Rick's tone was soft and, as he gazed at the girl, so was the expression of his bronzed face, which had been taut and hard a few moments since.

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"I want to talk about us, honey, soon's there's half a chance."

Color ran into her smooth, tanned cheeks; her eyes were star-like as she replied, "I'm willing."

Art and Joe pushed through the milling crowd to the pair, Art exclaiming:

"Looks like the luck is against Joe and me all around." He paused, surveying the couple up and down, then a grin spread across his face. "I see it's that way with you folks. Here's my hand, with my best wishes to both. I mean it!"

Joe was grinning, too, his hand as quick to come forth. "Same sentiments from Yours Truly, Joe Luce. Let us know when the weddin's to be, though, or we will get sore!"

Eve thanked them with tears in her eyes. Rick could say nothing, but just gripped their hands for a while.

But as Art and Joe turned away, Rick found his tongue. "Wait, fellows! Where were you when this lulu-gal saved me from come-uppance through dumb disregard of ammunition for my gun?"

"Why," Art wheeled, keeping weight on his good leg, "old Bronc—or Kingman, should say—suspected somethin' up when we asked him polite to hop over to the Friendly Glass for a wau-wau with you. He drawed—then we drawed; but he was so fast, he knocked the guns out of our fists. Then, not seemin' to want to kill us, he slammed first one, then t'other with his gun barrels and we took some shuteye on the store floor, long enough to miss seein' that there du-el. Our usual luck! See you soon?"

"Sure." Rick's anxiety forced him to add, "You boys ain't leavin' the valley?"

Together Art and Joe grinned at him, then at the girl.

"Not any," Joe replied for both. "Remember them two girls you introduced us to at the dance, Eve? Well, we like 'em a heap. We're goin' sparkin'—tonight. You know, risin' young cattlemen ought to have wives to help 'em through."

"That's swell!" Eve breathed, almost choked with happy tears.

"Great guys!" murmured Rick, as his pals disappeared in the crowd. He lowered his voice, held Eve closer and tipped up her firm chin. "One little kiss, honey, quick—nobody's lookin'!"

A NEW DEPARTMENT

for

Ranch Romances' Readers

The Westerners' Crossword Puzzle

See Page 150

Let's All Try to Solve It

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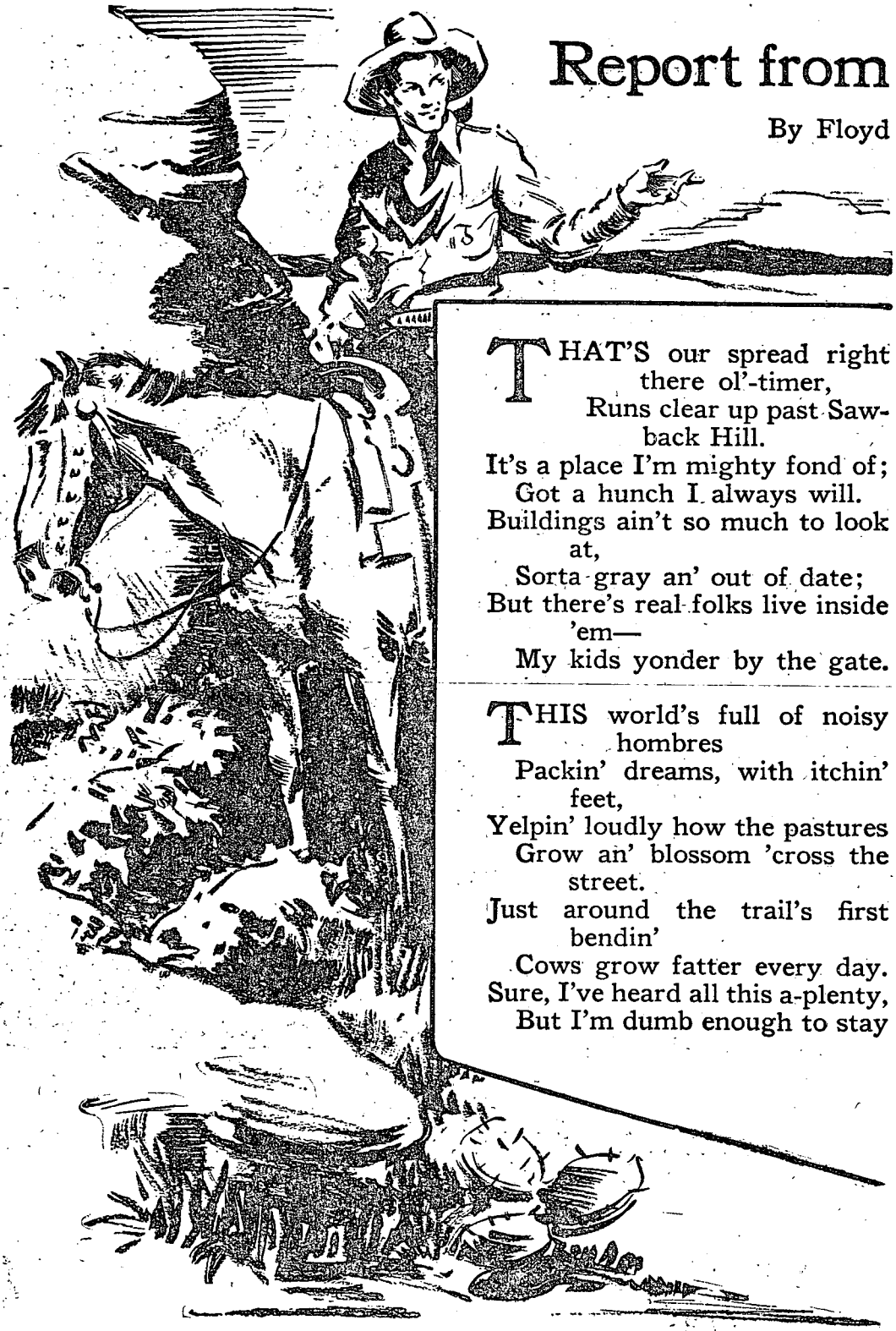

Report from

By Floyd

THAT'S our spread right there ol'-timer,
Runs clear up past Saw-back Hill.
It's a place I'm mighty fond of;
Got a hunch I always will.
Buildings ain't so much to look at,
Sorta gray an' out of date;
But there's real folks live inside 'em—
My kids yonder by the gate.

THIS world's full of noisy hombres
Packin' dreams, with itchin' feet,
Yelpin' loudly how the pastures
Grow an' blossom 'cross the street.
Just around the trail's first bendin'
Cows grow fatter every day.
Sure, I've heard all this a-plenty,
But I'm dumb enough to stay

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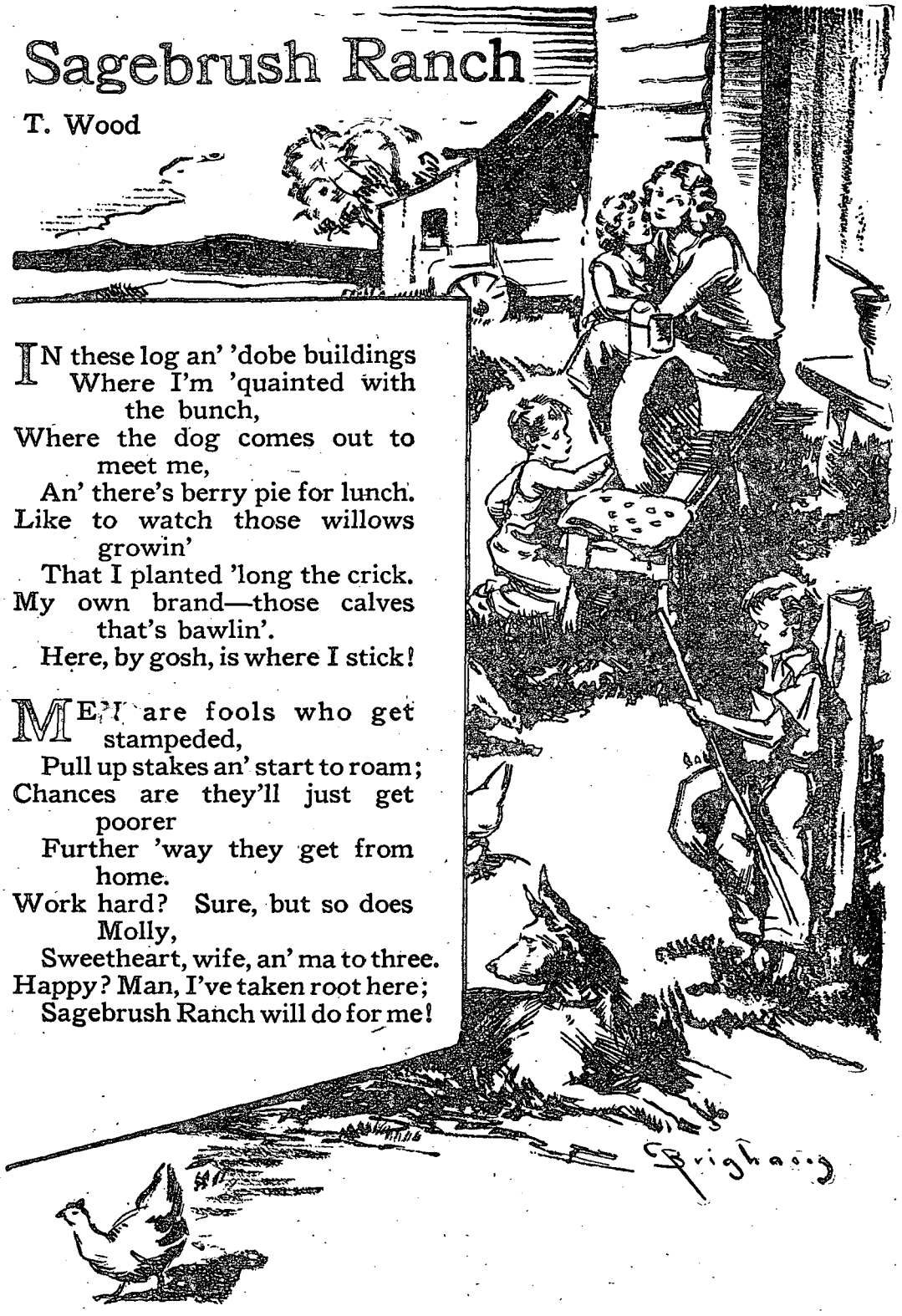
Sagebrush Ranch

T. Wood



IN these log an' 'dobe buildings
Where I'm 'quainted with the bunch,
Where the dog comes out to meet me,
An' there's berry pie for lunch.
Like to watch those willows growin'
That I planted 'long the crick.
My own brand—those calves that's bawlin'.
Here, by gosh, is where I stick!

MEN are fools who get stampeded,
Pull up stakes an' start to roam;
Chances are they'll just get poorer
Further 'way they get from home.
Work hard? Sure, but so does Molly,
Sweetheart, wife, an' ma to three.
Happy? Man, I've taken root here;
Sagebrush Ranch will do for me!

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Rusty, the Roughneck

By J. Irving Crump

Jimmy Gaffney lost his shirt to a short-horned gambler, but Rusty got it back for him along with the heart of the girl he loved.

CHUCKWALLA FULLER and his canine companion, Rusty, the rough-coated airedale that had been the old prospector's pardner for a good many years now, saw at first glance that something was troubling the pretty mistress of the A Up and Down. But when Leah Austen greeted them as they pulled into the ranch yard, Chuck never for a moment thought that her unhappiness had anything to do with Jimmy Gaffney. That young man was the owner of the Anchor brand across the valley, and had been Leah's life-long admirer. The old prospector found out, however, that he was very much mistaken when he inquired about the health of the aforesaid Mr. Gaffney.

"Chuck," said Leah, her voice vibrating with repressed indignation, "don't you ever mention that man's name in my presence again. I never want even to think of him, the despicable wretch."

Chuckwalla looked his astonishment, and even Rusty seemed a bit surprised.

"Shucks now, don't tell me yuh've

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gone an' had a tiff after all these years. Why, I thought—"

"A tiff!" exclaimed Leah, "I—why—I hate that man. Come up on the porch and I'll tell you about it."

Leah preceded Chuck up onto the ranch-house porch, where they seated themselves comfortably.

"Now, now, child," Chuck addressed the dark-haired and brown-eyed Leah, "I can't figure Jimmy doin' anythin' bad enough to make yuh hate him. But tell me about it."

"Well," Leah began, "someone left some strychnine-infested meat on the Stirrup Valley range and never said a word about it. Any decent man would have warned his neighbors that he had put out wolf bait, so that they could keep their dogs home. My dog, King, found that poisoned meat and ate some of it.

"If Jimmy Gaffney would do a little less rodeo riding, and keep his range clear of wolves with traps or a shotgun, he wouldn't have to resort to poisoning people's pets."

"Holy crinkus," Chuckwalla exclaimed, "yuh shore don't give that fellah no mercy whatsomever, do yuh? But how do yuh know it was Jimmy Gaffney done that?"

"Why, it was an Anchor brand yearling that was butchered. My foreman, Lou Dussak, and I found the carcass hid out in a sagebrush thicket. The liver had been removed and filled full of strychnine and left on Jimmy Gaffney's range, right beside the east ridge water hole."

Chuckwalla nodded with a faraway look in his eyes, as if he were visualizing that part of the range. Then he spoke:

"But that don't prove Jimmy Gaffney done it at that. Shucks, he ain't that kind of fellah. He wouldn't be careless thataway an' onconsiderate of his neighbors, especially you, Leah."

A bitter little laugh came from Leah.

"Jimmy Gaffney has changed a lot since you saw him last, Chuck—an awful lot. You'd be surprised. His rodeo riding has gone to his head and made him a conceited young fool. He isn't the same boy Dad and—and I were so fond of. Since Dad died, he's just gone plain to—to—well, he's lost his grip.

"I used to think I was the one who was keeping Jimmy straight, but I guess it was Dad. Since the Major passed on Jimmy has taken to gambling, and drinking, and fighting, and running around down in Keeno until—well, it's just scandalous. Everyone in Stirrup Valley is talking about the change in him."

Chuck's stubby, toil-hardened fingers scratched his iron-gray thatch perplexedly as his brow furrowed.

"Strange what a difference a year can make. Last spring you two was as thick as peas in a pod. Every evenin' Jimmy would slick down that red hair of his'n, an' put on that green silk shirt an' calfskin vest, an' them elkskin rodeo pants, an' come a-ridin' over here as big as yuh please. Yuh'd be all starched an' frilled up with a kind of a come-hither smile on yore pretty face, a-waitin' for him, too. It looked so genuine to me an' Rusty, we kind of figgered that over the winter the nuptual bells would do some ringin'. When we come breezin' in here, we expected to see as happy a bride an' groom as we ever laid our eyes on. An' here we find yuh both about as likely to be married as a badger an' a rattlesnake an' a-holdin' about the same opinion of each other as two stingin' lizards."

Leah had a very unhappy expression on her sun-browned face as she listened to Chuck. When he finished she nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, Jimmy and I were good friends while Dad was alive. Dad thought a lot of him, and I had promised to marry him. But I'm afraid Jimmy thought more of rodeo riding and the Wild West show business than he thought of me. I couldn't make him give it up, and after he won the All-States rodeo-riding championship at Pendleton last year, it just went to his head. He signed up to go on a tour clear from here to

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Chicago, New York and goodness knows where.

"He was gone for four months, and just when I needed him. When Dad died I wired him to come home and help me take care of this ranch. But he wouldn't come until his silly contract was finished. Well, that finished Jimmy with me. Any man who likes the crowd and bright lights and all that more than he does me—I'm through with him. I told him so flat, and ever since then you can't imagine how unpleasant he has been. Killing my dog, King, is only one of his nasty tricks."

The old prospector's eyes hardened suddenly. He focused them on Leah with such intensity that color came into her pale cheeks and flared to a brilliant scarlet at the question he popped at her.

"Lookahere, Leah, there wasn't somebody else a-cuttin' in on Jimmy's time about then, was there? Seems to me I heard yuh had a new foreman since yore father died."

Leah's embarrassment was made manifest for a moment by her stammering.

"Why—yes—that is—I suppose you mean Lou Dussak. Well, Lou is a nice chap, honest and straight-shooting, and he thought a lot of King. It broke him all up when King died. He thinks quite a little of me, too. But I—well, it isn't any of Jimmy Gaffney's business if I should fall in love with him. And even if I was fond of Lou, that certainly isn't any reason why Jimmy should act up the way he has been doing lately and—and—poison King, is it?" Leah's head came up, and her slender body stiffened while her eyes flashed with defiance and indignation.

"Shucks, no," admitted Chuckwalla uncomfortably. Then he added, "But Jimmy never did aim to poison King, I'm sure of that. You admit yourself it was wolf bait that was put out and—"

"I'm not so sure it wasn't meant for King. Jimmy knew I let King run a great deal during the day and he knew King always stopped at the east ridge water hole. Any dog would be liable to sample the liver of a freshly killed yearling; especially a police dog like King, who had always been fed on liver. Why, even your Rusty would be likely to sample it, and— Say, where is Rusty, anyway? Goodness, I hope he hasn't strayed away too far. I don't know just how much of that poisoned bait is scattered on the range nor where it's likely to be found."

Leah looked around apprehensively for Chuckwalla's airedale pardner, Rusty, who had come into the yard with the prospector. After having paused to greet the girl with a couple of deep sniffs and a wag of his stumpy tail, he had promptly disappeared.

"He's gone, Chuck; completely vanished. I think we'd better go looking for him," exclaimed Leah, when she noticed that Rusty was nowhere to be seen on the horizon.

"Oh, I ain't worried about that ole roughneck. Nobody ever fooled him with poisoned liver. He's off on his own business. Don't worry about him," said Chuckwalla reassuringly.

"But, just the same, he's a lovable old roughneck, and I think we had better look him up," said Leah. "Seeing one dog die in agony this week is quite enough for me. I don't want to see another. Come on, we'll search for him."

CHUCKWALLA'S confidence in Rusty was well grounded. After years of wandering around with the old prospector in every corner of the West he knew how to take care of himself well enough. Also, over that period he had developed certain interests of his own. While Chuckwalla was talking on the porch with the pretty mistress of the A Up and Down he was off attending to some of these personal affairs of his, which at the moment happened to be the quest of King, the big police dog who lived at the Austen ranch.

Last spring when he and Chuck had stopped there, a few months before Major Austen had died, King had just been acquired by Leah as a pet and personal protector. Rusty had chummed up to the police dog. In fact, they had estab-

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lished friendly relations to the extent of wandering off together to hunt jackrabbits, badgers, coyotes or anything else that a pair of dogs could pleasantly bedevil. King was younger than Rusty, with far less experience and less canine judgment; but he was a good fellow, and Rusty liked him. So the airedale's first interest on reaching the A Up and Down was to find King and renew acquaintance.

He did not know immediately that King was no more; that death had claimed the big police dog not three days since; that Leah Austen was without a canine protector. That is, he did not know it when he first arrived at the ranch, but it did not take him long to make this unpleasant discovery.

He caught the lingering scent of King about the ranch yard and proceeded to look him up; but, as he wandered from one point of dog interest to another, it gradually dawned upon him that something was amiss with King. Either the police dog had left the ranch or had been killed; for where Rusty expected to find recent information of him, as for instance at the wood pile, or the stone foundation of the barn, he found only stale evidence of his presence. King had not dug under the wood pile for ground squirrels for at least three days. The old earth told Rusty that. Also the whistling marmots and jackrabbits were as fresh as paint around the place. It was positively insulting, which was a condition a dog like King would never tolerate.

When Rusty got out behind the barn his nose unerringly led him up a little rise of ground to where fresh earth had recently been turned over and a good-sized mound appeared. Rusty took one sniff at the mound, and then he knew what had happened to King. His pal of last spring, the big, upstanding police dog, was dead. Moreover, he had not died from natural causes. He had died of that insidious poison that was often put out on the range to kill wolves. Rusty could smell the taint of strychnine, and he knew that some human being had had a hand in this killing.

The airedale scraped in the loose dirt with his paw and buried his nose deep in the fresh earth. A man had had a hand in King's burial, too. He could smell his odor all about the place. It was, moreover, an odor that reacted on him unpleasantly. Instinctively he knew that he could never like him; that there was something treacherous, something tricky and underhanded about him. He was the type of man that no dog could ever trust.

Quite unconsciously his neck hairs began to bristle, and a growl rumbled in his throat. Automatically he stopped his sniffing in the loose earth and raised his head, for he had a strange canine premonition that the owner of that unpleasant scent was somewhere in the vicinity, possibly watching him.

He was. Framed in the small rear doorway of the barn, Rusty beheld a tall dark individual with scowling brows and a rather bruised countenance. The airedale's growl rumbled deeper then, and a baleful look came into his eyes as his body crouched a little. As for the man in the doorway, a look of surprise crossed his face, an expression which quickly changed to one of anger. Then suddenly he ripped out an oath at the dog and stepped out of the barn toward him.

"Another dog on the place, huh? What are you doin' here, yuh snooping purp, you? Get out quick! Beat it before Leah sees yuh an' takes yuh on as a pet in place of that damned police dog. Git, I tell yuh. Beat it, or I'll lay yuh out," he called truculently.

As he shouted at Rusty, he took two quick steps forward and, bending down, swept a rock the size of his fist up from the ground and flung it with all his might at the airedale. It was done with such quickness that it might have caught any ordinary dog off guard and crushed in his skull. But it did not catch Rusty. Like a flash he twisted his body and leaped sideways as the stone snarled past him. In a bound he cleared the mound of King's grave and dropped

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down on the far side of it, where he crouched on his belly, neck and back bristling, eyes blazing and teeth bared in a savage expression of hate for the man who was advancing upon him.

As for that individual, his face clouded with an ugly expression when he saw Rusty's defiance, and, whipping his sixgun from his holster, he closed in on him fast.

"Yuh damned mutt you," he swore between clenched teeth. "Snarl at me, will yuh? I'll fix yuh, yuh—"

He was raising his sixgun for a shot at the dog, but even as he leveled it off he stopped suddenly, and a look of surprise crossed his countenance. From the front of the barn the voice of Leah Austen came to his ears, calling anxiously:

"Here, Rusty! Come, Rusty! Good old Rusty, where are you?"

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed the man in surprise. "She ain't gone and adopted *this* dog so soon, has she?"

Rusty heard the call, but he did not relax his alert vigil. The man looked over his shoulder inquiringly, however. Then, as Leah and Chuckwalla stepped around the corner of the barn, he hastily slipped his sixgun into its holster and turned toward them.

"Was that you callin', Leah?" he queried almost innocently.

"Yes, it was, Lou. Have you seen a dog—why, goodness, there he is now. Oh, look, Chuckwalla, that's really pathetic. Rusty has found King's grave and—and—why, he's crouching right beside it, just as if he were mourning the fact that King is gone. I believe he is. Remember what companions they were here on the ranch last spring? Oh, that almost brings tears to my eyes," said Leah, with a throaty catch in her voice.

The man she called Lou looked at her curiously for a moment.

"It's strange that I was thinking the same thing," he said, his tone suddenly becoming smooth and almost oily in his hypocrisy. "I saw the dog crouchin' beside the grave, and I was feelin' sorry for him. He looked so human! I was just comin' out to pet him when you came round the corner of the barn."

"H'm! I noticed that. Yuh was just gonna pet him—with a sixgun," said Chuckwalla dryly, eyeing the foreman coldly.

The man stiffened and looked hard at Chuck.

"He's a strange dog to me, and I wasn't sure he was friendly," he said sullenly. "I don't like to take chances on some dogs."

"Oh, he's the friendliest dog in the world, Lou," interrupted Leah. Then, realizing she had overlooked certain amenities, she introduced the two men. "This is Chuckwalla Fuller, the owner of the dog. Chuck, this is Lou Dussak. He's been foreman here ever since last summer. He's a good cowman, and he liked King."

Chuckwalla's appraising eye looked Dussak over from soft-topped riding boots to dark gray Stetson, taking in every detail of his batwinged chaps, blue flannel shirt, red neckerchief and almost swarthy complexion. He noted with interest that the man's face bore evidence of a recent encounter and several unpleasant-looking fist marks. Despite these bruises, he was good looking in a dark way, with a strange, hawkish kind of a nose and dark eyes set all too close together.

"Lou Dussak?" said Chuckwalla. "Why, I almost feel like I'd met yuh before, somewheres else. But them war scars o' yor'n kind of throw me off a li'l' tryin' to place yuh."

The foreman scowled at Chuckwalla and suddenly seemed very much annoyed.

"I reckon yo're mistaken, mister," he said abruptly. "I ain't never seen yuh before that I remember." Then, turning to Leah, he explained almost hurriedly:

"I had to ride down from the roundup camp to get a tongue bolt. The chuck wagon got ditched and broke down, and that dummy, O'Hallan, didn't bring an extra bolt with him. He got hurt in the accident, too; cut his head and laid his

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hand open. The whole thing has held up the round-up quite a lot. We're a day or two behind already, and we may be longer. By the way, Leah, can yuh get me some bandage and iodine to take back to camp with me? I'll have to doctor up that cook. Lord knows I might even have to turn in and do the cookin', too, before we get through with this job. Everythin' seems to be goin' wrong."

"That's too bad," said Leah, frowning in annoyance. "We got a late start on our calf round-up, too. Well, push the work along as fast as you can, Lou. I'm sorry about O'Hallan. I'll get you some bandage and iodine from the ranch house. Just wait here a moment!"

Leah turned and hurried around the corner of the barn toward the house, while Dussak and Chuckwalla watched her go. As she disappeared from their line of vision Dussak turned toward Chuckwalla, his eyes measuring him suspiciously.

"I don't remember seein' yuh before, mister, an' that's a fact. I ain't one of the kind to pass up an old acquaintance, either. I come from California; cattleman down there. Was yuh ever in Pinto Valley?"

Chuck shook his head, as he watched the man with more or less suspicion.

"Never been south of Dutchman's Flats in Californey," he said shortly.

"What yuh doin' round here? Aimin' to stay long?" queried the foreman. He was evidently fishing for information. Chuck gave it to him.

"Was plannin' to stay on a week, but now I've heard about this dog poisonin' I been kind of thinkin' I'd best be moseyin' plumb quick. Don't want to lose my dog."

A look of relief came over the foreman's face.

"That's right. That's right," he said heartily. "He's too nice a dog to want to take chances with, an' that poison meat is likely to be all over the place." He looked at Rusty, who still crouched behind King's grave, glaring at him.

"Fine dog, but this is no place for him. I like dogs and I wouldn't want to see him killed. I shore wouldn't stay, fellah." He was doing his best to help along Chuck's apparent indecision. It was evident to the prospector that the man had no desire at all to have him and Rusty linger in the vicinity of the A Up and Down.

Chuck wanted to see how far the man would go and led him on.

"Of course, Rusty is a smart dog. He ain't liable to be took in with ordinary wolf bait," he suggested.

"But this wasn't ordinary wolf bait. This was a nice fresh piece of liver. Hell of a thing to do, set a trap for a poor dog thataway. That Gaffney hombre is a mean devil. Any man who would poison a poor dog like he did King should have his house cleaned, and I aim to do it as soon as this calf round-up is over. I'll settle Gaffney and—"

Dussak stopped talking as Leah came around the corner of the barn, carrying a regulation, small-sized first-aid kit.

"Here you are, Lou. I bought this to send out with the chuck wagon, so it would be on hand for just such emergencies; but I forgot all about it. Silly of me, wasn't it? But the wagon left the day King was killed, and I was all upset. Take it out to the round-up camp with you."

"Thanks, girl," said Dussak, looking at her with a bland smile and an expression that obviously annoyed Leah a little.

"I won't be on the ranch this evenin' nor tomorrow night either," Dussak added, almost as if he were trying to establish an alibi, it seemed to Chuckwalla. "This round-up is goin' so slow I reckon I'll have to stay at the camp tonight with the boys. Tomorrow night, too, probably. I kind of hate to leave you on the ranch alone now, with King gone. Yuh won't be afraid, will you?"

"Afraid!" said Leah scornfully. "What's there to be afraid of?"

"That hombre Jimmy Gaffney, for one thing. He might—"

"Don't you worry about me or him either," said Leah, a trifle sharply. "I

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can take care of him. Just you attend to the round-up."

"Oh, all right, I'll be goin' then," said Dussak hastily as he glanced at Leah, then hurried toward the barn. A few minutes later Leah and Chuck saw him walk toward the corral, unhitch a horse tied to the fence and ride away. Only then did Rusty come out from behind the mound of King's grave and stare after the vanishing foreman with eyes that were filled with suspicion.

Leah caught the look and glanced at Chuckwalla.

"Rusty doesn't seem to like my new foreman. You don't seem over enthusiastic either, Chuck," she said a little uncomfortably, as she bent and smoothed the airedale's coat.

"To tell yuh the truth, Leah, I wouldn't trust that hombre as far as I could sling a cat by the tail. And as for marryin' him instead of Jimmy Gaffney, why, I—"

Leah's face colored as she spoke sharply.

"Oh, I'm not going to marry him, Chuck. In fact, I've turned him down four times this winter. I can't like him enough for that. But I'm not going to marry Jimmy Gaffney either, so that's that. You are all wrong, however, about trusting Lou. He's perfectly honest, I think. Sometimes he annoys me with his attempts to make advances, but all men do that. He's real considerate of me, though. Did you see how concerned he was about me being alone here on the ranch without King for protection?"

"Yes, I noticed that," said Chuckwalla dryly. "An' I've been thinkin' maybe Rusty an' me better stay here with yuh to see yo're took care of proper."

"Not for a minute, Chuck," protested Leah. "I won't let you stay. I wouldn't risk having anything happen to Rusty for the world; and it easily might, you know, with that poisoned wolf bait on the range."

Chuckwalla nodded. He was of the same opinion. Something might happen to Rusty, but he wasn't thinking of wolf bait.

"Okeh! If yuh'd be happier with us out of here, we'll be moseyin'. So long, Leah. We'll be seein' yuh on our way back in the fall maybe, and I'm hopin' that you an' Jimmy will have yore misunderstandin's patched up by that time."

"You needn't hope anything of the kind, Chuckwalla," exclaimed Leah, her eyes snapping. "I never want to see that gambling, good-for-nothing, rodeo-riding dog-killer again."

But even as she said it, her voice did not carry conviction. Chuckwalla noticed that there were bright spots of color in either cheek and that tears were perilously near to brimming over, all of which belied what she so stormily told him.

FOR years it had been the custom of Chuckwalla and Rusty to stop over in Stirrup Valley on their way north, for a short visit with Major Hugh Austen. Man and dog both enjoyed a brief stay with the old army officer and a chance to talk with pretty Leah. They also liked exchanging banter with young Jimmy Gaffney, who owned a small ranch across the valley and who was a constant companion of the major's daughter.

Things had changed at the A Up and Down over the winter, Chuckwalla knew. He had heard of the major's death the previous fall, but that had not surprised him, since the major was an old man. Moreover, he left his daughter more than passingly well fixed, for he was reputed to have been the wealthiest rancher in that section of Colorado. Knowing that Leah and Jimmy were head over heels in love with each other, the old prospector had expected to find them married and living happily together at the big ranch house.

It annoyed him a great deal to find that conditions were quite the contrary. He was especially disturbed at Lou Dussak being injected into the situation. Chuck's instinctive reactions to Dussak had been about the same as Rusty's. The man was too suspiciously oily to be trusted. The more Chuck thought of

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him as he trudged across Stirrup Valley after leaving Leah, the more convinced he was that he had come across that fellow somewhere. But the name Dussak was not familiar to him. Chuck raked his brain all the way from the A Up and Down to the east ridge water hole in Cradle Draw trying to place him in his memory. But when he and Rusty and the pack burro, Misery, stopped for water, he still had not been able to identify the man nor remember where, in his wanderings in the West, he had crossed Dussak's trail.

At the water hole Chuck and Rusty had little difficulty locating the butchered Anchor brand yearling. A loud smell and a half-dozen croaking buzzards pointed out the location of the carcass in a sagebrush thicket well back from the water. However, beyond identifying it as a creature bearing Jimmy Gaffney's brand on its rump, the discovery helped them very little. In the moist sand at the water's edge they found the footprints of King and located the place where he had eaten the poisoned liver. Rusty sniffed these tracks suspiciously, whining unhappily as he followed King's uncertain trail around the edge of the water hole in the direction the police dog had taken toward home before death had claimed him.

But he had scarcely gone twenty feet, while Chuckwalla watched him, when he stopped suddenly, sniffed deep, then pawed a dark object out of the sand. Then he backed away quickly, his neck bristling and a growl rumbling in his throat.

Chuckwalla, curious to see what Rusty had found, hurried toward him, and a moment later he was bending over a big case knife, with blade closed, lying in the sand. It had a black horn handle on which was rudely carved a fascimile of a playing-card—the deuce of diamonds. As Chuck's old eyes encountered this, a grim smile of satisfaction puckered the corners of his mouth, and he turned to grin at Rusty.

"Young fellah, yuh've identified him for me. I know who Dussak is now. He's Deuce Dobson, a short-horned crook and gambler who used to hang out in the Sandstone Saloon in Silverville until he stabbed a man there, for which he was run out o' the State of Arizona. He tried to make me believe he come from Pinto Valley in Californey, too, the sucker.

"This is his knife with his brand marked on it. I saw it once before, when he pulled it on a fellah in Silverville an' somebody knocked it out of his hand. Findin' this makes it kind of certain he killed that Anchor brand yearlin' and butchered it for the liver. He must of used this knife. After washin' it off at the water hole, he laid it down an' it got covered with sand. He couldn't find it again, but you was able to smell it out. Boy, this is evidence we'll be needin'. Go get hold of Misery's lead line, Rusty. We're goin' down to Jimmy Gaffney's in a hurry."

It was getting on toward sunset when the wandering trio pulled into the yard in front of Jimmy Gaffney's unpretentious log cabin, which looked deserted and somewhat neglected. Chuckwalla was puzzled to account for this appearance until, walking out toward the barn, he discovered Jimmy sitting on the top rail of the little stock corral, hunched up like a buzzard, with his elbows resting on his knees and his chin in his hands. His hat was on the ground and his curly red hair was tousled and disheveled.

He looked as desolate and as lifeless as his cabin. Nor did he show much interest when Chuckwalla hailed him, while Rusty romped up to the corral rail and stood on his hind legs to paw at Jimmy's dusty boots.

"Hello, Chuck," said Jimmy almost wearily. "When did you pull into Stirrup Valley?"

"This mornin', an' it shore seems like I'd walked in on a funeral," said the old prospector.

"I reckon yuh have, Chuck," said Jimmy. "I'm buryin' a lot of lost hopes tomorrow. I'm pullin' out of Stirrup Valley."

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"What? How come?" demanded the prospector.

"Why, I'm turnin' my range, cabin an' what stock there's left over to the bank, to settle up my debts. Then I'm hikin' to parts unknown. I'm about as popular round here as a case of smallpox, anyway. Ain't yuh heard?"

Chuckwalla nodded as he filled his pipe.

"Yeah, Jimmy. That's why I stopped over thisaway. I just wanted to find out how come yuh've got so careless as to leave wolf bait on the range without warnin' yore neighbors."

Jimmy's head came up out of his hands as he snapped a protest.

"Hell, I didn't scatter no wolf bait, Chuckwalla. It was some other rancher. There's eight of us in the valley. You know I wouldn't do such a thing. So does Leah! She's just sore at me, that's why she's left the blame on my doorstep."

"But what for is she sore at yuh, Jimmy? Last spring you an' her was as—"

Jimmy held up his hand in protest.

"Don't remind me of last spring, Chuck. I was a happy, carefree kid then. I'm a bent ol' man now, all wore out with grief an' misery, an' all on account of that damned rat-faced foreman she's got, Lou Dussak. I wish I'd killed him last week when I lit into him down in Keeno. But if I'd have done that, Leah would never have forgiven me. Chuck, she's in love with that hombre."

"Which you figgered was a good reason why yuh should take to drinkin' an' gamblin' and fightin' an' makin' her more disgusted with yuh," said Chuckwalla critically.

"Say, yuh've been talkin' to Leah," exclaimed Jimmy accusingly.

Chuck nodded.

"Stopped over there this mornin', and she told me what a no-account hombre yuh'd turned out to be."

"Which tales are gross exaggerations, Chuck, spread around by this same Lou Dussak," said Jimmy. "I've done very li'l' drinkin', an' not much fightin'. The gamblin'—that's another story."

Chuck eyed him closely.

"Well, suppose yuh tell it to me, son," he suggested, leaning comfortably against the corral fence. Jimmy hesitated a moment as he looked down at the old prospector. Then he slid from his perch and leaned against the fence, too, while he began to kick the sand disconsolately with the toe of his foot.

"I kind of hate to tell yuh everythin', Chuck, an' that's a fact. It only shows up how dumb I am and always have been, I reckon. Yuh see, me an' Leah, we've been in love with each other for a long time, and I've been wantin' to marry her. The one thing that always held me back was she, or rather her paw, had such a lot of money. Shucks, his old iron safe was just bulgin' with stocks and bonds; everybody knowed that.

"Well, me bein' a poor man, it just didn't look right to hitch up with her unless I could bring her somethin'. The quickest way I knew how to make money fast was by rodeo-ridin' for prize money, or gamblin'. I tried rodeo-ridin' first with pretty good success.

"But Leah never could see why I took to the buckers, especially when it got to takin' me so far away from home. She said only lazy fellahs tried to make money thataway, and I should stay home and tend to my ranch. She'd get real annoyed at times when I'd go off for a month or two at a stretch with travelin' rodeos. I was off on one of those swings with the Shelton Brothers that would take me clear from Livingston to Chicago, New York an' Philadelphia, last fall when her father died.

"I got a letter from her about his death when I was in Pittsburgh, an' of course I felt real busted up about it. I wired back I'd be comin' home as soon as the circuit was finished, me havin' a contract with Herd Shelton, the promoter, which I couldn't very well break, and Herb bein' a friend of mine, too.

"My reply didn't make Leah happy.

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She couldn't see why I didn't pull up stakes an' come back anyhow. She said so in no uncertain terms in a letter I got in Harrisburg, which tore me up a lot and made me lose first prize money that week. I wrote back an' explained that I had been hired on as one of the features of the show, me havin' won the All-States rodeo-ridin' championship at Pendleton last year, and that I had a moral an' legal obligation to the Sheltons, which I had to fill.

"Of course she couldn't understand that neither, an' one letter led to another so that by the time I hit New York, Leah wrote that she had signed on a foreman named Lou Dussak and she guessed she could get along without me forever. An' that was that!

"Her letter plumb spoiled my ridin' forever, I reckon. As the All-States' champ I was a terrible flop. The travelin' rodeo got to be a flop, too. By the time it got to Philadelphia it went broke, and a lot of us exhibition riders headed back to the range, ridin' in the box cars with our hosses. When I got home here, Leah wouldn't even pass the time of day with me, an' there was a lot of gossip around about her bein' sweet on her new foreman.

"I heard he was quite a boy down in Keeno, too, settin' in at the poker game in Stemler's place pretty regular. I went down there to get a squint at him, and edged into the game, bein' fair with the pasteboards, as yuh know. 'Course, it wasn't any time at all before this Dussak an' me was buckin' each other strong, an' I'm here to state he's a card player. Before I knew it he was takin' me to the cleaners regular, an' I was gettin' desperate. I not only lost the li'l' ole roll I had saved to marry Leah with, but I put a mortgage on this place with the bank an'-lost that. Shucks, I lost everythin', silver-mounted rodeo saddle, elkskin pants an' all.

"I was beginnin' to get suspicious of that sucker an' his infernal luck, but I never caught him cheatin' until last week, which was the last game I sat in on. Then I'm damned if I didn't catch him fumblin' a card from the bottom of the deck. I had a notion to go for my gun; it was darned hard work to keep from doin' it. But all of a sudden I thought of Leah. I knew if I leaded that boy, she'd never forgive me, because rumors was he'd asked her to marry him.

"I couldn't help beatin' him up, however, an' I guess that just about finished me with Leah, anyway. When she saw him comin' back to the ranch with his face all full of stickin' plaster an' heard I was responsible for it, she decided, with what he likely told her, that I was a drunk an' disorderly loafer. That's the hull sad story, Chuckwalla, an' I've shore made a mess of things."

Chuck nodded in silent agreement as he sucked on his pipe thoughtfully, while he watched Rusty trying to dig out a pocket gopher from beneath Jimmy's woodshed.

"That beatin' yuh gave him didn't make him any more friendly toward yuh neither, did it?" he reflected, speaking more to himself than to Jimmy.

"Say, we hate each other's guts, Chuck," said Gaffney savagely.

"Which would make him willin' to kill an' Anchor brand yearlin' on yuh an' poison the liver so's to blame you for Leah's dog's death. It was a Anchor brand yearlin', Jimmy. Rusty an' me stopped a minute over in Cradle Draw to have a look-see. And Rusty found that sucker's case knife with which he done the butcherin'."

Jimmy looked hard at Chuckwalla, a wrathful light slowly kindling in his blue eyes.

"Yuh mean that son of a so-and-so poisoned Leah's dog an' made it look like I was the culprit?" he demanded.

"Which would be almighty likely, seein' as how he knowed yuh had once been pretty close to her, an' him wantin' awful bad to make yuh look like a low-flung loafer," admitted Chuck with a nod. "But," he added suddenly, "the more I think of it, the more I feel that ain't all that's to be figgered in the picture."

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"Huh? What do yuh mean?" demanded Jimmy, puzzled.

Chuckwalla pointedly ignored making a direct explanation.

"That King dog was Leah's on'y companion an' protector on the A Up and Down Ranch since her father's been dead. That's true, ain't it?"

"Why, yes, I reckon so," admitted Jimmy. "She used to tell me he slept in the house and was a darned good watch dog."

"Uh-huh, I thought so. In that case the dog would be the first thing this buck, Dussak, would want to get out of the way, if he was figgerin' on pullin' somethin' crooked. And so as not to show his hand in exterminatin' the animal, he'd frame it so's it looked like somebody else was responsible."

"I'll be damned! Yes, that's true!" exclaimed Jimmy.

"Well, pickin' up that hombre's knife identified him to me as a short-horned gambler and bad man who got run out of Silverville, Arizona, about two years back for stabbin' a man in a fight that wasn't quite on the level. Also, if I recommember correctly, there was other things against him which made him a no-account, unprincipled devil who wouldn't stop at nothin'. Knowin' Leah's well fixed financially, an' knowin' he ain't got a chance to marry her—which he ain't Jimmy, for Leah told me she had turned him down four times this winter—maybe he's plannin' to rob her."

"Why, the dirty rat!" cried Jimmy. "I'll fix that hombre. I'll get a gun now an' go over there after him."

Jimmy made a quick start for his cabin, but Chuckwalla stopped him.

"Easy, fellah. That ain't the way to do it. Yuh can't go over an' salivate him just on general principles. With no proof, that would be just the same as murder in Leah's eyes. An' anyway, he ain't there. He let on he was spendin' the night at the round-up camp, which may have been just a stall to cover up somethin'."

Jimmy hesitated.

"That devil *is* plannin' some dirty work," he said. "Chuck, we've got to protect Leah."

"Which we'll do, son. Rusty an' me, we're goin' over an' ride herd on that situation a li'l', an' I tell yuh what yuh do in the meantime. Saddle up yore best hoss an' hit the breeze for the county seat at Truro, an' find out what Sheriff Bill Tuttle has got on the docket against Lou Dussak, alias Deuce Dobson. That's the name that hombre went by down in Silverville, an' I'll bet there ain't a sheriff this side of the Red River that wouldn't like to lay hands on him.

"You just tip ole Tut off that that fellah's up here, an' he'll come up hell bent to put the bracelets on him. That'll save you from th' stigma of killin' a man in the eyes of Leah, an' show Dussak up as a dirty sucker. If yuh do some hard ridin', yuh can be back at the A Up an' Down long before daylight. If Dussak hasn't tried any dirty work by that time, Tut can go on up to the round-up camp an' nab him. Get goin', Jimmy, an' meanwhile Rusty an' me, we'll go back to Leah's place an' keep our eyes peeled for trouble."

JIMMY delayed his start long enough to cook up some flapjacks and sow belly for his guests and to lay the foundation for a night's hard riding. Then, while Chuckwalla cleaned up the frying-pan and greasy dishes, the red-haired cowboy saddled up and headed out across the range for Truro. Fifteen minutes later Chuckwalla, riding Misery, with Rusty romping silently on ahead through the starlight, started westward again for Leah Austen's outfit, Chuck urging the burro to its best gait.

But Misery's best was not sufficiently fast to get them there short of midnight. Chuck was therefore just a little worried about how he was going to break in on Leah's night's sleep and explain his reasons for returning to the outfit. However, as things turned out, he did not need to worry on that score. Someone had already broken in on Leah's slumbers most unconventionally.

As Misery swung out of a deep draw

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onto the flats and headed up the brown ribbon of road that led into the big A Up and Down ranch yard, Chuck was surprised to see a dim light glowing in the direction of the ranch house. It was a momentary flare that went out suddenly, but presently another light appeared, as if someone had struck a second match. Then a slightly stronger glow shone through the windows of the ranch-house living room.

"By grab, somethin' is happenin' up there already," he muttered as he spurred Misery forward and turned him out of the road toward one of the two big barns on the place. Gaining the shelter of this, he dismounted and chirped Rusty toward him.

"Lookahere now, young fellah, you stick close to me until we see what that light means up yonder. It might be Leah is nervous an' got up to take a look around, or it might be that there's trouble afoot an' we've just about walked in on it. At any rate, we'd best be careful. Come along, an' be darned quiet about it," he admonished as he started around the barn, taking advantage of every shadow.

Rusty did not need instructions to be cautious. He sensed immediately what Chuck wanted of him, and he moved along just ahead of the old prospector as silently as a shadow. Still taking advantage of every shelter, Chuck worked his way past the second barn, the wagon shed, the empty bunkhouse and the equally empty foreman's shack. As he passed the feed rack he paused. A horse was hitched there. Chuck could see traces of steam rising from its sweating flanks, and he could smell the strong odor of a hot animal.

"Leah's got a visitor, by blazes! He just arrived, too. That looks bad! Come on Rusty, but be danged careful," he warned as they moved silently across the yard toward the front of the ranch house. Gaining the shadow, Chuck paused there and removed his boots, while Rusty watched him with interest.

"Can't make no noise on that porch, but we've sure got to savvy what's goin' on inside. Don't hear no voices, do yuh?" he muttered to the dog as he carefully cached his boots behind a bush.

In his red worsted socks he started stealthily up the steps, with Rusty trailing him curiously. Then he moved to a position where he could look in at the nearest lighted window.

For a moment, as old Chuckwalla gazed into the living room he was struck dumb with amazement at what he saw. Indeed he stiffened in his tracks and brushed the back of his hand across his eyes as if to clear his vision. Then he peered into the room again, and a muttered oath escaped him, for there before his eyes was a figure who looked startlingly like the All-States rodeo-riding champion, Jimmy Gaffney. The man was bending down in front of Major Hugh Austen's old iron safe, in the very act of robbing it. The figure was clad in a green silk shirt, concha-studded elkskin chaps and a broad-brimmed Stetson hat of fawn color. Moreover, the mop of hair that showed beneath the hat was red and very curly. The man had a black mask over his face, and as Chuck looked at him he was just in the act of going through a bundle of bonds and stock certificates he had taken out of the strong-box.

While he was hurriedly inspecting the packet, however, a noise within the room itself attracted the robber's attention. He came up out of his crouched position like a shot, to turn his masked face toward a door at the far end of the room. Chuck, holding tight to Rusty with a grip on his throat that kept him from growling very loud, looked in the same direction, to behold Leah Austen, a startlingly pretty figure in a dressing gown, standing in the doorway. For an instant Leah looked alarmed, but, as her eyes focused on the robber, her countenance flamed with anger. She, too, thought she recognized the All-States rodeo-riding champion, despite the mask.

"Why, Jimmy Gaffney, of all things," she exclaimed. "You've become a thief

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now too, robbing me, of all people! I can hardly believe it! Have you lost every shred of self-respect you ever had?"

The intruder did not reply. Instead, he hastily crammed the papers he had in his hand into his shirt front and, turning, made toward the door that led out onto the porch. But Leah, angry almost beyond words, started toward him as she cried:

"Jimmy Gaffney, you stop where you are! Give me those bonds and stock certificates! You fool, don't think because you have a mask on and haven't spoken to me I don't recognize you. I don't have to hear your voice to know who you are in those rodeo clothes, and even if I didn't lay eyes on you I'd know you committed this robbery. Look, you've left your neckerchief on top of the safe. Oh, you bungling amateur! Give me back my property! I won't let you be a thief even if you want to be one."

Leah swept toward him with a quick rush, trying to get between him and the door, nor did the fact that the robber snapped out a sixgun and centered it on her seem to phase her one iota. Indeed, she laughed sneeringly as she planted herself in front of him.

"What a fine man you are," she cried, "drawing a gun on me, the girl you might have married. I'm not afraid of it. Go ahead and shoot if you're that depraved." As she spoke she threw back her head and stepped toward him until the barrel of the sixgun all but touched her bare chest.

For a moment the two made a strange, melodramatic tableau; but only for a moment, for suddenly the safe robber, in a desperate move, whipped the sixgun upward and brought it down in a clubbing blow on the girl's head. Leah, seeing the man's intentions, threw up her hand to ward off the blow and tried to twist out of the way. Before she could any more than move a trifle, however, the gun had descended and cracked her soundly on the side of the head. With a groan of pain she crumpled to the floor, believing that Jimmy Gaffney had felled her.

At the same time the robber, with an oath, started toward the door again, anxious to get out of there with the loot he had got from the old safe. But he had not taken two steps before Chuckwalla and Rusty, out on the porch, snapped into action.

Chuckwalla suddenly realized that this never in the world could be Jimmy Gaffney. Remembering, moreover, that Jimmy had said he had lost everything he owned, even his rodeo clothes, to Lou Dussak, he ripped out an oath of anger.

"Hell, that's that impostor, Dussak, tryin' to make out he's Jimmy. Go git him, Rusty," he exclaimed as he loosed his grip on Rusty's neck. He was not telling the airedale anything the dog did not already know. From the first Rusty had recognized Dussak by his actions and the scent of the man, that lingered in the heavy night air. He had been straining in Chuckwalla's grasp to get at this individual who was threatening his friend, Leah Austen. Indeed, when that sixgun crashed against Leah's head, he all but tore himself from Chuckwalla, and the instant Chuck released him he hurled himself through the window, carrying glass and sash with him as he leaped like a tawny thunderbolt at Lou Dussak's throat.

The crash of glass brought Dussak around like a flash, with his sixgun leveled. Before he could pull the trigger, however, Rusty, with jaws opened, fangs bared and eyes blazing with wrath, was upon him. With swiftness that was eye-defying the dog struck with wolfish ferocity and clamped his powerful jaws onto the wrist of Dussak's gun hand, giving it a terrific twist and at the same time throwing his full weight against the man's chest.

That hold and savage wrench would have thrown a range bull, let alone Dussak. The man was hurled halfway across the room by the force of Rusty's plunge, his sixgun spinning from his grasp as he fell over a chair and crashed to the floor. For a moment there was a

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cyclonic mêlée there in the middle of the living room, for Rusty, now that his adversary was disarmed, was lunging for his throat with deadly intention.

Dussak's shirt was in shreds, his black mask was torn off, and hat and wig of red curly hair were ripped away as Rusty swarmed over him, snapping, snarling and trying savagely to get his teeth into the man's neck. A deep hate welled up in Rusty's chivalrous soul for any man who would treat a woman as he had treated Leah Austen.

Dussak, cursing and yelling with fear, was fighting the dog off to the best of his bare-handed ability and making a poor job of it when Chuckwalla came into the room by way of the door. Gathering up Dussak's sixgun, he centered it upon its owner. When the thief's fear-lit eyes looked up and saw the old prospector, he began to yell wildly.

"Take him off! Call off this damned dog! He'll kill me," he cried in sheer panic.

"Might be a good job if he done so," said Chuckwalla bitterly. Then he added, "Still I gotta be human about it, I reckon. If yuh'll promise to lay still, I'll call him off."

"I'll promise anything! Take him off, for Gawd's sake!" cried Dussak.

Chuckwalla called off Rusty, who reluctantly obeyed, backing away but watching Dussak with blazing eyes and dripping jaws, as if he were almost hoping that the man would start something. But Dussak did not start anything. As meek as a lamb now, he turned over on his stomach at Chuck's command and put his hands behind his back, where Chuck lashed them securely. Then, making fast his feet, too, the prospector grabbed him by the collar and yanked him to a sitting position against the wall.

"There, yuh dirty thief, you, we'll just hold yuh until Jimmy Gaffney brings the sheriff, when I reckon yuh'll be took care of proper," said Chuck, as he turned away to look after Leah Austen.

But the girl had already revived from that blow on the head and was sitting up on the floor, staring in bewilderment.

"Why, it's Lou Dussak! What does this mean? What happened?" she cried as she looked from Dussak to Chuckwalla. "I thought it was Jimmy Gaffney who was robbing my safe."

"Shore yuh did, Leah. An' yuh thought it was Jimmy Gaffney who poisoned yore dog. Yuh just didn't have faith enough in the man who loves yuh to think otherwise."

Leah got to her feet, face pale, a puzzled expression on her countenance.

"I—I—can't understand. I—I just don't—"

"Set down there, Leah, an' I'll tell yuh all about it," said Chuckwalla gently, forcing her into a chair. For a moment he looked at her with sympathy. Then he began:

"It's just that this fellah, Dussak, which he's a no-good gambler an' crook, slipped one over on yuh, Leah. You bein' rich, with a safe full of bonds an' stock, which was common gossip round here, he aimed to clean yuh out one way or another. He got hisself hired on as foreman an' tried to get yuh sweet on him, which probably proved to be slow work; too slow for him, anyway.

"So he decided then to rob yuh, but he aimed to do it slick an' throw the blame on Jimmy Gaffney when he found yuh was in a fit state to believe anythin' about pore Jimmy. First off, yore dog bein' a watchdog an' sleepin' in the house with yuh was in the way. So he shoots one of Jimmy's steers, butchers it by Jimmy's water hole an' poisons the liver. Then when King dies, he takes yuh out an' makes yuh think Jimmy's done it.

"All the time he's been playin' poker with Jimmy down in Keeno, too, and with his slippery dealin' he's been cleanin' Jimmy out of everythin' right down to his rodeo clothes an' saddle. I reckon them rodeo duds of Jimmy's was what he was playin' for all the time, anyway. With them he aimed to masquerade as Jimmy. See, he even bought that red wig an' black mask just

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so's if you or anyone else seen him at his safe-robbin', they'd swear it was Jimmy Gaffney done it. I'd of swore it was Jimmy myself if I hadn't knowed where he was right at th' moment.

"An' he aimed to have yuh believe Jimmy done the job, even if yuh didn't see him at it. He left Jimmy's blue neckerchief over there on top of the safe. There's Jimmy's initials on it. I can see 'em from here. Any jury would of convicted Jimmy on that planted evidence. This hombre is a smooth kind of a buck, an' on'y for Rusty an' me, I reckon he'd of got away with the job and yuh'd be believin' yet that Jimmy done it. Yuh see he had a score to settle with Jimmy, too, for that beautiful lacin' he gave him last week, when he caught him cheatin' at cards."

"The miserable scoundrel, he told me Jimmy was drunk and picked a fight with him. Lou Dussak, you're a dirty skunk," she cried, her eyes blazing with anger as she stared at the sullen foreman.

"He's more than that. He's a cheap crook and a gambler with a bad record in Silverville, Arizona, where he stabbed a man and had to beat it out of town. He goes by the name of Deuce Dobson down there. It was kind of hard for me to identify him at first, until we located this here knife of his'n down at the Malpais water hole, where he left it after he had butchered Jimmy's steer. Rusty was the one who dug up that evidence on him."

"Good old Rusty," said Leah. "I owe a lot to that faithful airedale." She looked at Rusty, but her thoughts were not on him.

"What makes me most unhappy," she said suddenly, "is all the ugly things I've said and thought about poor Jimmy. Chuck, do you suppose he'll ever forgive me?"

Chuck smiled broadly as hoofbeats sounding across the night announced the coming of several riders.

"I dunno," he said, his old eyes twinkling, "but I got a idea yo're gonna have a chance to ax him. This sounds like him comin' with th' sheriff."

A minute or two later Jimmy and the sheriff were stalking into the room. And if kisses mean anything, there was not much doubt about Jimmy's forgiving her. When Chuck and Rusty left the ranch for the hills, a week later, the calf round-up was being finished under the supervision of a new foreman, who was the very happy life pardner of Leah Austen.

Echoes

THE West, which has grown with such amazing swiftness, is not so old yet that some who are alive today cannot still hear the echoes of Indian war whoops. Not so long ago actual fighting was being done. That wily Chief Joseph, great Indian leader of the Western empire, was engaged in a struggle with the whites of the Territory of Montana just fifty-five years ago. The Montanans, at that time under command of General Howard, met the Indians near Camas Meadows. They were surprised by the Indians before sunrise one day, and cut off from their horses by a terrific volley of rifle fire.

Casualties among the whites were not numerous, however, since the Indians overshot their targets in most cases, and the huge lava rocks afforded safe retreats. Eventually the soldiers and citizens rallied and defeated the attackers. The victory was not decisive, however, and the Indians escaped with supply wagons and a large number of horses and mules.

The West, in spite of the changes that have taken place, remembers these battles in reclaiming of the great cattle lands; waddies reminisce and old-timers frequently recall thrilling battles when the Indian war whoops echoed over the prairies.

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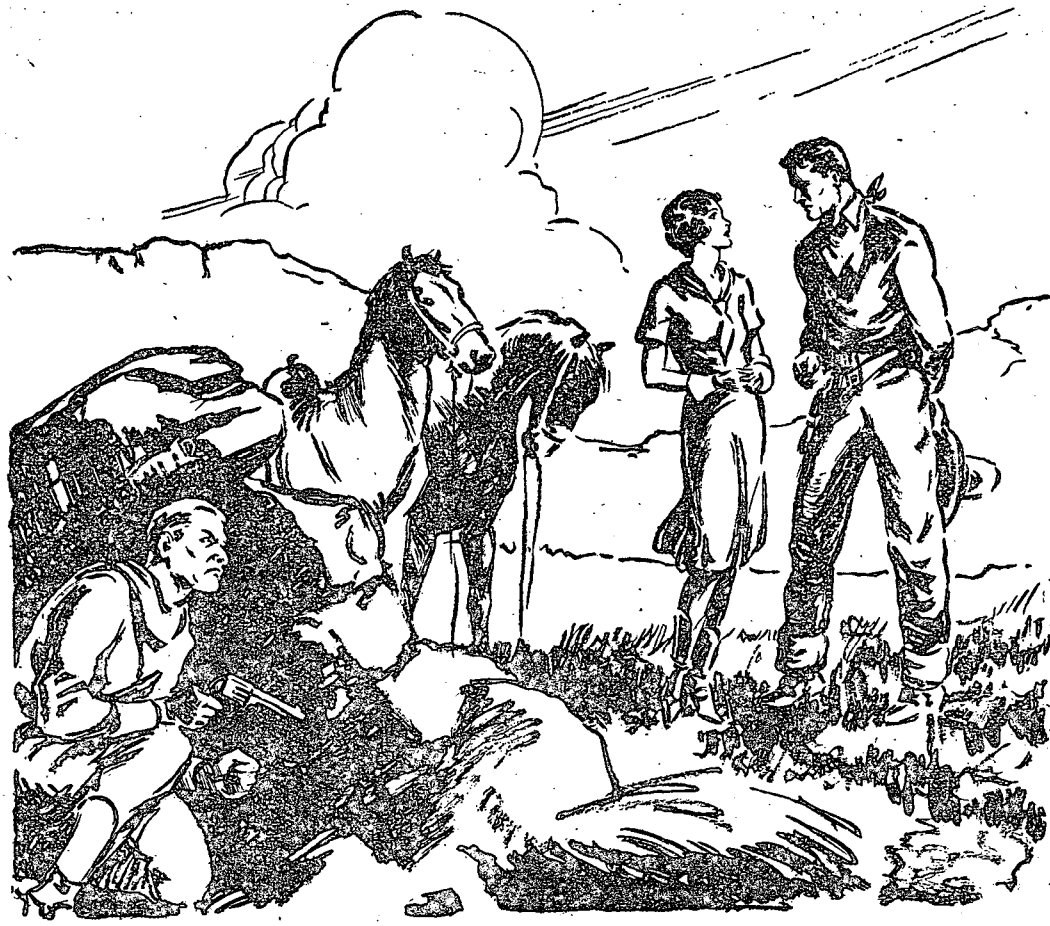

Double Dealing

By Cliff Farrell

She had imagined a wedding 'midst flowers and music, and now she found herself saying "I do" to a man behind prison bars. But she gave her heart with those words, just as she had dreamed of doing.

RHODA LOU arose early, studied herself in her mirror for a long time, and sighed as she looked at the calendar on her dressing table. She barely tasted the breakfast that John Ching, the cook, placed before her, and left the table hurriedly as she saw, from the window, Uncle Al Pettit drive up in his buckboard. She had been expecting Uncle Al.

"Well," said the old doctor accusingly as he spread the tails of his long coat and settled in the deepest chair in the big living room of the ranch house.

Rhoda Lou shook her head slowly. It was a lovely head. The morning sun through the big east windows, worked living gold into the mass of her hair. "It's no use, Uncle Al," she said, trying to smile. "I'll start packing up."

Uncle Al scowled and wagged a big finger. "Daggone it, don't yuh realize that if yuh let this inheritance go to Hector, that Chick Tracy will own this

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ranch, lock, stock an' muzzle, inside of a year? Dern his oily hide! Hector Radford is yore cousin, an' maybe I oughtn't to speak so blunt, but he's a spineless, drunken bum. I learned the other day that he's given Chick Tracy near a hundred thousand dollars in notes. Gamblin' debts! Think of it! That's half the value of the R Loop already. An' Tracy will cheat Hector out of the rest of it in no time at all."

Rhoda Lou moved to a window and stared unseeingly out over the smiling range. Some of the riders were busy around the corrals. Red Allen was working on the rough string down near the creek. The ring of an anvil came from the blacksmith shack. It was hard to think of losing the R Loop, and harder to know that it was going into the hands of an unscrupulous schemer like Chick Tracy.

But Rhoda Lou would be twenty-one years of age on the morrow. The R Loop had been willed to her in trust by her father, grim old Tex Radford, with one important proviso. That was that Rhoda Lou should be married before her twenty-first birthday arrived. Tex Radford had wanted the hand of a man at the helm of the R Loop.

The time was short now—only a few hours and though Rhoda Lou had had three years since her father's death, she was still unwed.

"Well, I've failed," she said, but to Uncle Al it did not seem that there was great regret in her voice.

"Yuh've had a dozen chances," he pointed out grimly. "Some of 'em was decent fellers, too. Yuh stampeded them all."

"And the most of them were aiming to marry the ranch, not me," she flashed. "I didn't love any of them."

"Did it ever occur to yuh that yuh don't need to be in love to go through a marriage ceremony?" Uncle Al said, leaning forward. "Now, now, don't look at me like that. I mean, all that's necessary to comply with the law is to be married before midnight tonight. The thing can be annulled immediately."

Rhoda Lou turned, and her big, dark eyes were suspicious. "That sounds like you have a bridegroom already selected," she said.

Uncle Al cleared his throat. "Jerry Winters is—er—well, his Bent Tree Ranch is goin' to be taken over by the bank in two weeks, unless he raises ten thousand dollars to meet his mortgage. An' he can't do it. The blizzard last winter played hob with his beef herd. He can't raise the money. An' do yuh know who'll get the Bent Tree after that? Chick Tracy! Tracy is all set to buy it from the bank, an' he'll get it dirt cheap."

Uncle Al knew a lot more than he pretended. For one thing he knew that Rhoda Lou loved young Jerry Winters. Rhoda Lou thought it was a secret, but the old doctor had been too much of a father to her to be deceived.

"And is Mr. Winters agreeable to such a business arrangement?" she queried with apparent lightness, though the color had drained from her round cheeks.

"Ain't spoke to him," Uncle Al said briefly. "That's up to you. Any sane man would grab an opportunity like this."

"Then I'm to propose to Mr. Winters in order to save both of our ranches for us?" she went on.

"It's that or lose everything," Uncle Al said savagely.

Rhoda Lou was staring into the distance again. Uncle Al believed she was considering his plan. The fact was that she was unable to speak. The R Loop had been her home since her birth. But it was a mighty spread that had long since outgrown Rhoda Lou. It had its superintendent, its range bosses, and its three or four ranches, for it ranged its cattle over many hundred square miles. It made money as a machine makes money. It was a mammoth thing, but it had no real heart, now that Tex Radford was dead. It was an established thing. Its life was behind it. It would grow no more.

Jerry Winters' Bent Tree, like its

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owner, was young and vigorous, struggling for success. Rhoda Lou, in her secret heart, had pictured herself as helping guide its growth. It was the pioneer spirit in her the same spirit that in her father had created the great R Loop. Until now she had not fully realized how completely she had built her dreams of the future on something else than the R Loop; and that something else was the Bent Tree range with its mountain glades and cool, long draws nestling into the sides of the uprearing Tecopa Range.

So this was why Jerry Winters had avoided her the past long months? His ranch was in danger. And oh, the bitterness of it! Chick Tracy would get the Bent Tree, too.

Her impulse was to go to Jerry at once, to help him and to comfort him. He needed her now. He did not realize that she loved him. She knew that she had kept that a secret from him, though she believed that he loved her.

Rhoda Lou had wanted him to sweep her away into romance, as is the dream of every girl. She knew why he had always remained silent and at a distance when other suitors were parading themselves in the hope of becoming masters of the R Loop. It was that proviso in the will. Jerry Winters was no fortune-hunter. And as a result Rhoda Lou had come to regard her qualified inheritance as a burden that delayed her happiness. She had longed for the day when the R Loop would no longer stand as a barrier to Jerry Winters' declaration.

And now this freezing revelation! Rhoda Lou knew Jerry. Penniless, he would never come to her.

Uncle Al's impatient voice broke into her dreary thoughts. "Go ahead! Throw away the ranch! Give the whole thing to Chick Tracy! He's counting it as his own already. He's—"

"Speaking of the devil, eh?" an ironical voice broke in.

Chick Tracy himself stood in the doorway, a sleek figure, garbed with studied effect. He wore doeskin breeches, stuffed into gold-threaded, soft half-boots. His wind-breaker was of velvety doeskin, and had been tailored to his order on a military design. It fitted him like a glove. Four big pearl buttons held it down the right side. His big Stetson was dented meticulously and canted at an exact angle. Two silver-mounted forty-fives adorned his sides, beautiful guns—but sinister.

Tracy, in spite of his dandified ways, was a hard, dangerous man, whose guns had made their kills. Having power and wealth, he ruled the cowtown of Lone Pine, and few men dared challenge him.

"I wouldn't libel the devil," Uncle Al snapped.

Rhoda Lou remained silent. Chick Tracy had always aroused her aversion. Woman-like, she picked flaws in his garb. His boots bore too high a polish to be condoned in a country where men ride hard and work harder. His sky-blue hat was picturesque, but it would stampede a nervous herd on a windy day. One of the big pearl buttons on his wind-breaker was loose, and dangling by a thread.

"I like to be around when I'm talked about," Tracy was saying.

"Some jaspers jest hunt for insults," Uncle Al told the world, lighting a stogy.

Tracy's face flamed a darker hue, and he took a furious stride toward the old doctor. But he thought better of it, and turned to Rhoda Lou.

"I brought your cousin out to the ranch," he said. "Hec isn't feeling in the pink this morning. He thought he could surround all the firewater in Lone Pine last night."

He strode out and returned carrying a sodden burden. Hector Radford, the blacksheep, was beyond salvage. As a youth he had chosen the broad, winding path, and had whirled wildly down it through the years. Now, at the age of forty, he was nearing the inevitable end.

"Where will I put him?" Tracy asked insolently.

"Yo're sorta previous," Pettit snapped. "This ain't his ranch—yet."

Rhoda Lou, pity in her heart, pointed

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to the rear. "There's a bedroom, first door to the left."

When Tracy moved on with his burden, Rhoda Lou seized her wide, soft hat from the deer horns beside the door, and pinned it on. Her lips were quivering. "I'm going—going for a ride," she said and ran out as though fleeing from ghosts.

Tracy returned, brushing his palms. "Where is she?" he asked quickly.

"She didn't like the atmosphere in this place all of a sudden," Pettit said.

"She ought to enjoy the house while she can," Tracy smirked, "although, of course, we—I mean Hector—will be glad to have her stay on."

Uncle Al feigned surprise. "That's nice of yuh—I mean Hector. I sorta carried the idea it was Miss Radford that was allowin' Hector to stay here."

"Not after midnight tonight," Tracy pointed out. "She isn't married, is she? Hec owns this spread tomorrow, and yuh know it."

"Tomorrow is a long time away," Uncle Al said calmly.

Tracy eyed him suspiciously. "Is she going to marry someone today?" he demanded, and there was a growl of menace in the question.

"Wouldn't be a daggoned bit amazed."

Tracy stared. Then he whirled and eyed Rhoda Lou, who was loping eastward toward the Tecopas, mounted on a slim, dappled mare.

"I'll be ridin' back to town," Tracy said abruptly.

He mounted his flashy black, headed down the ranch road, and as soon as the swells concealed him, veered eastward at full speed. Soon he sighted Rhoda Lou at a distance, entering the foothills ahead.

"It's that Winters hombre, I'll bet a dollar," Tracy gritted, his eyes hard as jade.

IT was noon when Rhoda Lou reached the crest of a long ridge clothed with incense cedar and sugar pine. She had crossed the westerly line fence of the R Loop some miles back and now was on Jerry Winters' Bent Tree Ranch. Rolling away gently before her was a smiling mountain valley, with the spread of a small ranch a mile in the distance. She could see one man swinging a rope at the corral. Jerry Winters could afford no riders to help him, between round-ups.

The rider topped off and headed toward the ridge. It was Jerry. No one else sat the saddle with that easy indolence. He entered a draw farther north, and Rhoda Lou rode to intercept him. High color flamed in her cheeks. How should a girl go about it to propose marriage? She attempted to rehearse the words, but they would not stay in her mind.

And so it was that she met him before she had framed any intelligible speech. All she could say was, "Howdy," realizing that her cheeks were too pink and her eyes too bright.

Jerry Winters' lean, bronzed face lighted, and he snatched off his weather-worn gray hat. "Howdy," he exclaimed. "Daggone, I shore didn't dream you was ridin' thisaway."

The soft drawl of his voice was balm to her. But she saw that tight lines had deepened about his mouth and eyes. He wore his gun, too, a black-handled forty-five, scarred with service. Everything about Jerry was serviceable. He was a working cowman from hat to boot heels, and it was good to look at him.

There was an awkward silence. Jerry drew his eyes away and swung down. "I was aimin' on ridin' over an' seein' yuh tomorrow," he said hesitantly. "Or will yuh be—I mean will yuh—"

"No, I won't be at the R Loop tomorrow," she said as he helped her down. She tried to laugh lightly, but it was a failure.

The slope of the hillside caused her to lean against him momentarily. They were very close. She was looking into his eyes.

He pushed himself away abruptly. "Nice day," he mumbled.

Rhoda Lou stroked her horse's shoulder. "I hear—I heard that you are hav-

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ing—having trouble. Mortgage due or something!"

Jerry's lips compressed. She saw his strong fingers clench. "Yeah, a little trouble," he admitted.

She felt a wave of impatience. Why, oh why, was he so proud, so self-reliant? Why, in his need, would he not at least tell her about his worries? But she knew his stern, inflexible make-up. Jerry Winters would never come to her empty-handed. It was his rigid code of honor. She was accustomed to the comfort and security of a wealthy ranch. He could offer nothing but poverty. Why, soon he would be looking for a job as a cowhand somewhere.

"Can I help?" she pressed.

"Reckon not." He was uncompromising. She could have shaken him. Instead, it was her voice that was shaking as she began.

"I've been thinking. You know my father's will—about insisting on my marriage. I am twenty-one tomorrow. The ranch will go to Hector. And that means that Chick Tracy will cheat him out of it. Hector is so weak. I wondered—that is, I thought—I mean that perhaps it would be a good business arrangement if we—that is, if you and I were to—to— We can be married today and have it annulled tomorrow. Uncle Al Pettit says so."

She poured forth the final words with a rush, her breast heaving, her eyes averted, her face on fire.

Jerry Winters shook his head. "No," he said, without a tremor of expression, though his cheeks had grown gray.

"Why?" Rhoda Lou choked. She was at the breaking point.

"Because a man has to stand on his own feet," Jerry blurted out, and emotion broke through on his own countenance. "A mock marriage, for money! It wouldn't be right. Yuh don't love me. I've got to go this thing alone. If I lose out, I'll start over again, like I started the Bent Tree, on a shoestring. I'll build up another spread. Then, maybe—if—"

He stopped as though he had reached a forbidden barrier.

"Then what?" Rhoda Lou asked tensely.

"Then—I don't know," he said dully, the fire dying from his eyes.

He was so blind, so foolishly blind to the message in her eyes. He had laid out his own path to her heart, and the first step on it was success as a cowman for himself. Until that step was achieved, he would never even believe that such a message could possibly be there.

A chill was in Rhoda Lou's heart. She would wait for him. But she had already waited. The years would be long, and life was fleeting. What if he never came back?

Listlessly she turned to mount. The touch of his hands caused her to tremble as he helped her. Without a word she rode away and did not look back.

Jerry watched her ride over the rim, his eyes dead. Then, with a hoarse, tortured cry, he smashed a fist into a palm.

He whirled on his heel to mount. He wanted to ride far and fast in the hope of easing the pain in his own heart.

As he whirled, his right spur caught in a crevice in the bed rock that was exposed at that point; and the spur snapped at the shank. Then he swung into the saddle, hardly knowing or caring what happened, and galloped down the draw.

A head lifted above a shoulder on the flank of the draw. A silver-mounted gun rose, its bore centered on the back of the departing young rancher. It was Chick Tracy, murder blazing in his eyes. His finger tightened on the trigger. Then, with an effort, he controlled the impulse and lowered the gun.

"Not here," he gritted. "She would hear the shot. She might ride back and sight me. Anyway, she and that doctor would suspect me."

He watched Jerry Winters disappear among the timber. Tracy was seeing a fortune slip through his fingers. He had trailed Rhoda Lou to this point, had watched her meeting with Jerry. But he

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had been unable to creep close enough to hear anything definite.

He had distinguished only one word. "Marry!" That was enough. Tracy was sure in his own mind that Rhoda Lou and Jerry Winters had agreed on marriage.

"They'll try to be hitched tonight in town before the justice of peace," he decided. Fingers twitching as he rolled a smoke, he tried to think. He was breathing hard. The murder urge still surged in him, but he did not dare.

Suddenly he moved down to the spot where Rhoda Lou and Jerry had talked. Tracy had seen Jerry break his spur. Now he picked up the ratchet with the attached broken shank, and stared at it with narrow, calculating eyes for a long time. Then he raced over the rim to his horse.

UNCLE AL PETTIT waited at the R Loop until Rhoda Lou returned. But she fled to her room without speaking. Knowing that things were hopeless, he had climbed into his buckboard and returned glumly to Lone Pine. He had been at his desk an hour now, staring sourly at the weather-beaten building fronts and saloon awnings that lined the shambling street which drowsed in the late afternoon sun. There were legal matters to which he should be giving his attention but he had no heart for it.

He saw Chick Tracy come riding into town, put up his horse and enter the Double Ace Bar.

"What's that jasper been up to?" Uncle Al asked himself testily. "He left the ranch three hours ahead of me. Tryin' to rob someone else of their ranch, I reckon."

Mechanically he glanced at his watch and noted that the afternoon stage was twenty minutes past due. This was the eve of payday for the ranches, and the stage would be bringing in a cash box, as usual, for the bank.

Then a boy of sixteen came thundering into town, bare-legged and riding a wild-eyed young pony. The lad's eyes were popping from a pallid, freckled face. He tumbled off at the sheriff's office, and Uncle Al started out of his chair as he heard the boy's shout.

"Stage stuck up! Jim Foley's dead—an' the shotgun feller, too. They're layin' beside the stage back there about two miles. Gosh, it made me sick when I found 'em."

Uncle Al emerged, bawling to the livery wrangler to hitch up his rig. Uncle Al was coroner of the county.

Dusk had come by the time Sheriff Bill Maxwell, Uncle Al and a sizable representation of curious citizens reached the scene. It was a grim sight. Jim Foley, the grizzled stage driver who was a friend of everyone on that range, lay face downward in the dust of the trail, ten feet from the stage. The horses had been tethered to a tree. The body of another victim dangled from the seat.

"That's Buck Elwell," the sheriff identified. "He was ridin' shotgun. Hey, you dunderheads! Stay back there! If all of yuh go trompin' around, yuh'll rub out any trail they might have left."

Uncle Al hurried to the bodies, while Maxwell and his deputy began searching the vicinity in the hope of picking up a clue before darkness came to impede them.

"Rifle bullets through their chests—both of 'em," Uncle Al reported briefly as the sheriff returned after ten minutes.

"Yeah, it was a lone-handed job," the sheriff said grimly. "He cut loose on them without warnin'. Here are two empties. He fired from behind that rock. Cold-blooded murder! The cash box is gone. About seven thousand in it, I reckon. That's the usual amount. Small bills an' coin mostly, easy stuff to get rid of. It was an amateur job—local talent."

"Why do you say that?" Chick Tracy wanted to know. He had been making himself evident in the search for clues.

"Professionals don't kill unless their hands are forced," the sheriff said impatiently. "These pore fellers were shot

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without warnin'. Lucky there wasn't any passengers on this run, or they'd have got it, too, most likely. Why? The killer was known by either Buck or Tom. He didn't dare let 'em live. That's my hunch."

"Must have been somebody that needed money right bad," Chick Tracy boomed loudly. "We'll get him an' string him up."

The crowd muttered ominous approval. Uncle Al caught the sheriff's eye, and they conferred behind the stage.

"Foley wasn't killed with the first shot," Uncle Al whispered. "He was hit hard, but fell off the box an' played 'possum. He tried to jump the killer when the feller come up to get the money. There was a scuffle. But Jim, bein' hurt bad, couldn't make the grade. The killer finished him with a sixgun."

"Well, Jim's dead, an' dead men don't talk," the sheriff said. "The skunk must have left his horse far back in the timber. There ain't much chance of trailin' him over pine needles."

Uncle Al lighted a stogy and waited. Darkness was coming rapidly. Suddenly there was a shout from the deputy. He came in, and the sheriff, summoned by his call, appeared from the opposite direction. Uncle Al stepped up to listen, too.

"Here's somethin'," the deputy said. "Chick Tracy spotted it near where yuh found them empty thirty-thirties. It's the broken half of a spur what was caught in a slit in a rock."

The sheriff eyed it closely. "Got a six-pointed star worked on the hub," he mused. "Seems to me I remember seein' a spur like—" Abruptly he broke off.

Bill Maxwell had sharp eyes and a memory for details.

"Well, keep lookin' around," he told the deputy. "An' don't holler so loud the next time if yuh find anythin'. That crowd is ready to lynch somebody. They thought a lot of Jim Foley."

After a moment he caught Uncle Al's eye. Again they met behind the stage. "Yo're a friend of Jerry Winters', ain't yuh, Doc?" the sheriff asked. "Get into yore rig, circle round an' meet me up the trail half a mile. Don't let anyone follow yuh."

But when they met, Chick Tracy appeared from the darkness and joined them. "You can't lose me," he grinned. "I knew yuh'd identified that spur, Bill. I'm ridin' with yuh."

SOME three hours later, a trio of riders drew up silently at the rear of the jail building in Lone Pine. They had not entered town by the trail, but had slipped in from the brush-covered flats to the north. One was a prisoner, his hands in irons. He was Jerry Winters, and his face was set and desperate, disbelief written on it. The other riders were the sheriff and Chick Tracy.

"We made it," the sheriff said. "Nobody saw us. Now, if any word gets out about this, Chick, I'll know who to blame. By mornin' they'll be in a mood to listen to reason. Tonight they'd lynch their own brother without stoppin' to think about it."

"Yuh can count on me," Tracy nodded and rode away.

The sheriff slipped his prisoner into the jail. A cell door clanged from the interior. Jerry Winters, charged with murder, had been placed behind bars.

Forty minutes later Uncle Al Pettit's buckboard, horse a-lather, came racing out of the darkness into town. Uncle Al pulled the animal back abruptly and the chalky-faced girl at his side gave a cry of alarm. It was Rhoda Lou Radford. The street was impassable ahead. A somber mass of men was in front of the Double Ace Saloon. Someone on the steps was haranging them. It was Chick Tracy. There was a low, ominous murmur in the air, the snarl of a mob working itself up to the killing pitch.

Chick Tracy had not kept his promise to the sheriff. He had spread the news.

"We got here in time," Uncle Al panted. He whirled the horse to the left between two buildings, and the buckboard bounced over ash heaps as he headed it for the rear of the jail.

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"Don't you ever, ever take a chance like that again," Rhoda Lou said, her voice shaking with the reaction. "Why didn't you tell me as soon as you knew they were going to arrest Jerry? What if we had been too late? What if—"

"But we made it," Uncle Al protested, though in his heart he was vowing that he never would take a wide chance like that again. "Here yuh are. Go in. Bill Maxwell knows yo're comin'. I'll round up the county clerk an' the justice."

Rhoda Lou, her knees quivering, ran to the office door at the front. The growl from the mob was growing louder. Bill Maxwell opened the barred door at her call.

"Jerry? Where is he?" she cried. "Hurry. I must see him at once."

He led her into the cell-room, and then she was peering through the bars at Jerry Winters' set face.

His eyes lighted unbelievingly. So Rhoda Lou had come to him in this hour of disaster! That was worth a lot.

"I was framed," he said grimly. "They're aimin' on lynchin' me for a murder I didn't do. Someone planted my broken spur at the scene of the stick-up. The killin' was done with my rifle which was stolen from my shack. Then the rifle was returned an' the stolen money planted under my bunk before I come in from the range this evenin'. It was only a couple miles from my shack to where the job was done. It's a frame-up, I swear it."

"I know," she breathed. "I know! Tracy is inciting them to lynch you. I won't let them do it, Jerry."

His hands were steady as they closed over her own where they rested on the bars. He was unflinching and cool in the face of death. Never had she realized how deeply she loved him.

"You better go now," he said gently. "Sounds like they're headin' for the jail. Nothin' can stop 'em now."

"Jerry," she said chokingly, "will—will you marry me? Marry me now?"

Sudden repulsion swept over his face. He withdrew his hands abruptly, and the hard light that leaped to his eyes chilled her. He looked stonily at her for seconds. Then he laughed bitterly.

"So that was why yuh came," he said tonelessly. "To save yore ranch, to marry a man who ain't got long to live! Well, why not?" He drew out his watch and studied it.

"Ten minutes to midnight," he said harshly. "I reckon I won't be dead until after midnight. That'll make yuh a bride in time to qualify for yore ranch. Shore, Miss Radford, I'll marry yuh. I see yuh've brought the justice. An' won't it be a fine weddin'?"

Rhoda Lou was sobbing. She realized that Uncle Al Pettit was at her side, pushing a pen into her hands. A paper was before her. The county clerk, an apprehensive figure, was holding it. Nearby stood old Benjamin Andrews, justice of the peace, a Bible under his arm.

She signed the marriage license shakily, while the boom of the mob rose from the front of the jail.

She saw Bill Maxwell unlocking the cell door. Jerry Winters signed the license with a steady hand. Then he broke the pen with a twist of his strong fingers and cast the bits away.

"Let's get it over with," he said, his voice metallic.

Jerry took her hand, but he did not look at her. Ben Andrews began mumbling the service hurriedly, his voice hoarse with strain. Somehow the words seemed to mingle with the rumble from outside.

There was a crash! The office door was being stormed.

Rhoda Lou swayed as she thought of the wedding she had dreamed of. A church, flowers, music! And now this harsh reality—shadows, a flickering oil lamp, prison bars and the thunder of a mob seeking the life of the man who held her hand!

She mumbled, "I do,'" at the proper place as Uncle Al nudged her, and she heard Jerry's echo a moment later.

Then it was over. They were married!

The mob was in the office. A batter-

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ing ram crashed on the iron door of the cell-room.

Bill Maxwell produced a gun and belt, handed it to Jerry. It was Jerry's own forty-five. "Yuh might need this, boy," he said.

Then the sheriff raised a booming voice and shouted that he was going to open the door. The mob stilled for a moment in surprise.

Sheriff Maxwell stepped up and released the bolts. The door swung open.

Chick Tracy was there in the doorway, heading the mass of inflamed faces that crowded at his shoulder. For an instant there was rigid, amazed silence. Tracy's eyes widened in consternation, and then slitted down in fury as he saw Rhoda Lou and the others. The significance of it dawned upon him.

"You—you—" he mumbled hoarsely, pointing at Rhoda Lou.

"Yep," Uncle Al Pettit said. "She's married. Yuh didn't work fast enough, Tracy."

"What do we care!" a voice in the crowd howled. "He murdered Foley an' Elwell. Stand back, Bill Maxwell. We're goin' to string him up. He can't hide behind no woman."

Bill Maxwell laughed ironically. "I always knew most of you hombres was light above the collarbone, but I didn't think yuh'd fall hard as yuh did. Jerry didn't hold up the stage. He ain't as dumb as you hombres. Yuh don't think a smart boy like Jerry would leave his broken spur lyin' around the scene, do yuh? Yuh don't really dream he would have let them two empty rifle shells lay there in plain sight? An' I don't believe even you jaspers would have been thick-headed enough to have hid the money in a place like we found it. It was all too danged plain an' easy. Jerry was framed by someone."

"He's lyin'," Chick Tracy shouted. "We all know that Winters needed money—needed it bad. He's got a mortgage to meet. The sheriff's giving you a sandy, boys. Come on! We'll string Winters up."

Bill Maxwell raised an arm. He turned. There was a cot against the stone wall beneath the oil lamp, and he twitched a blanket from it. The mob had surged forward, led by Tracy, half a dozen of them pouring into the cell-room. But now they stopped dead in their tracks. The body of Tom Foley, the murdered stage driver, lay on the cot in much the same position as that in which he had lain in the dust of the trail when they found him.

"Tom's got somethin' in his hand that will tell us who the real murderer was," the sheriff said grimly. "Tom wasn't killed outright by the rifle shot. He lived to get his hands on the killer, an' he's got the proof of who killed him."

"What is it?" someone asked in a tense whisper.

"Maybe yuh'd like to open his hand an' see, Tracy," the sheriff said.

Tracy did not stir. He was beginning to crouch, his hands falling near his guns.

"Yo're shy one of them big pearl buttons on yore jacket, Tracy," the sheriff went on relentlessly. "Wouldn't yuh like to find it?"

Tracy licked his lips. Rhoda Lou stepped forward.

"You'll find it—in Tom Foley's hand," she cried bitterly.

Tracy's teeth clicked. His eyes, green with sudden desperation, flashed to Jerry Winters. Then his hands whipped to his guns. He was trapped, but he meant to take Jerry Winters with him into death.

Boom! A six-shooter thundered in the confining walls. A second report echoed it, coming from Chick Tracy's guns. But Tracy was falling as he pulled the triggers, a bullet through his heart.

Jerry Winters stood there, his gun in his hand, the ring of smoke from its muzzle breaking on the ceiling just above his head. He had drawn and fired with deadly speed and accuracy.

Finally he turned and looked at Uncle Al Pettit. "You—all of yuh knew that I would be proved innocent of this," he said, an accusation in his voice.

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Uncle Al grinned shamelessly. "Yuh was framed twice today, Jerry," he admitted. "Once by Tracy—an' the second time by me, an' the sheriff, an'—an'—others." He looked at his watch and drew a sigh of relief. "Well, it's exactly midnight. You two young fools can be as stubborn an' ride yore pride as hard as yuh please from now on, but I done what I aimed to do. I kept the R Loop in the proper hands."

Jerry's eyes swept the cell-room, but Rhoda Lou was gone. The mob had parted at the door, and she had slipped away.

He found her outside, ready to climb into Uncle Al's buckboard, just as his hands closed on her wrists and stopped her.

She looked up at him steadily. "You can have the marriage annulled tomorrow," she breathed.

Jerry shook his head. "A thing like that means more than a few mumbled words to me," he said.

"I knew it," she replied, and she did not look at him now. "And I don't believe in annulling a marriage either. That's the reason I wanted those words said."

"Yuh mean that you—"

Then she was in his arms.

"Indian Givers"

GIFT time for the Indians—a custom observed much after the same fashion as Christmas time by the white people—comes in the summer and not the winter. Especially is this so of the Plains tribes of the Middle West. Tribal visits between tepee villagers during the outdoor season invariably end with give-away feasts. The visitors go home laden with bolts of calico and blankets, and leading gift horses. When the hosts in turn become guests, the same horses frequently are brought back to their former homes as presents.

The gift custom sticks among the Plains Indians who move into the open either as families or tribes each summer, in spite of the fact that the Federal Government long has attempted to discourage it. "Indian givers" are still swapping horses back and forth out West.

Members of Trail's End

Whose pictures appear on pages 152 and 153

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FIRST ROW, *left to right*—Mrs. Roy B. Harris, Rippon, W. Va.; Rose Keller, Erie, Penn.; James Smith, Keene, Ontario, Can.

SECOND ROW, *left to right*—Rupert Sontag, Des Moines, Ia.; Mrs. Dessie Pemberton, Los Angeles, Calif.; Mrs. E. Lewis, Artesia, N. M.

THIRD ROW, *left to right*—Loretta Sellers, Breese, Ill.; Emma Severson, Waupaca, Wisc.; Mrs. John Reed, Wink, Tex.

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FIRST ROW, *left to right*—Carlton Jernigan, Portsmouth, Va.; Isabelle Wright, Clifton Forge, Va.; Percy Kernay, Kalamazoo, Mich.

SECOND ROW, *left to right*—William Beff, Dunmore, Penn.; Sing Parker, Bastrop, La.; Mrs. Elsie Workman, Stockton, Calif.

THIRD ROW, *left to right*—Joe Kukits, Stiles, Penn.; R. F. Harper, Bastrop, La.; Erwin Henry, Allentown, Penn.

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Say It with Sixguns

By Amos Moore

When danger threatened, Gale Chandler, superbly muscled and straight as an arrow, said what he had to say with the blue-black guns he handled so expertly. But was there nothing gentler in his heart, no message that required a softer, sweeter language?

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

"Just between Friends"

NOTHING could have been further from Gale Chandler's intention than to play the rôle of eavesdropper.

In the first place, he would have found it difficult to imagine how anything which Jake Stockridge might have to say could possibly be of interest to him; and, in the second, he was chafing with impatience to complete his purchases at the store and get started back toward the ranch.

But old Pop Corrigan's clerk was having an afternoon off; and Pop himself, lame and cranky from a severe attack of rheumatism brought on by the wet spring weather, neither could nor would be hurried. He limped about, groaning and complaining; he stopped every other minute to hold his back and swear; he mislaid his spectacles three times and then suspended all activity—if such his slow, shuffling hobble could be called—to search on the counter, through shelves and in boxes galore for them.

Meanwhile, the three men on the

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porch of the store went on with their conversation; nor did they make any attempt to lower their voices, which would have been audible twenty feet away.

They were grouped just outside the door, which was wide open; and young Chandler could not choose but hear. Even at that, he was wholly inattentive to what was being said, until a name spoken in a voice that had a high-pitched, unpleasantly twanging quality, made him prick up his ears and knit his brows in a quick frown. He recognized the voice for that of one "Big Charlie" Barnett, a not too reputable character employed on the Long Bar Circle, a dude ranch owned by Stockridge.

"Kit!" Big Charlie was saying, with disparaging contempt. "Kit ain't no name for a girl; it's a man's moniker. Seems that 'Christine' didn't suit her, though. I heard tell when she wasn't only a little bit of a kid, she wouldn't answer to nothin' but 'Kit.' She—"

"Yeah—an' now she's aimin' to live up to it, looks like!" Stockridge said. "If she was a daughter of mine, I'd turn her over my knee an' dust the seat o' them fine, fancy breeches with the flat of my hand. I'll gamble she'd be standin' up to her meals for a spell if I had the handlin' of her, the bold-faced, forward little minx! She'd ride an' act like a lady, or she wouldn't ride a-tall!"

Stockridge brought the palm of one immense hand down on the other with a ringing smack, as if in illustration of what he considered the just deserts of the young person in question, meanwhile squirted a turgid stream of tobacco juice expertly into the dusty road.

He was a giant of a man, with huge powerful limbs, enormously wide shoulders, and the head of a blond Hercules, covered with thick, tight-curled hair of the color of ripe corn silk. He had a bluff, hearty manner, a toothy smile that seldom failed to impress Easterners favorably, and a deep, resonant bass voice. When he laughed —which was a good deal too often—the sound that rumbled up out of the depths of his great chest was like the bellow of a bull. He had been named Jake, but he was never called anything but "Bull."

"Why, Mose, I wisht yuh'd been around to see her!" he went on, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Hat off, hair a-flyin' seven ways for Sunday, sleeves rolled 'way up, face all over paint like them fool city women that comes to stay at the Long Bar Circle. Scorch 'em for a bunch of come-to-me-boys, if they are rollin' up the dollars in my bank account. Then she goes tearin' through town here on that long-legged star-faced buckskin hoss as if all hell was ridin' after her. I hope to die if I didn't think for a minute she was somethin' that had strayed loose from a circus!

"Kit Kenniston—a-makin' a holy show of herself right here on the main street of Silver Forks, an' drawin' every eye in town! I tell yuh, boys, I was so plumb ashamed for her I just had to turn my head an' look the other way, I sure did!"

"Yes, yuh sure did—not!" Big Charlie jeered, in his thin, high-pitched twang. "Me, I got a life-size pi'ture of Bull Stockridge turnin' his head to look the other way when a pretty gal rides by! But I seen her, too, Bull, an' I was thinkin' the same thing—how plumb unlady-like an' immodest she was actin'.

"An' then I seen what it was all for. That New York writer feller, Ed Winter, that's boardin' out to the ranch, was just walkin' out o' the telegraph office, an' she was puttin' on the show for him. Givin' him the glad eye, an' makin' out she couldn't manage her hoss, yuh know! An' him, not knowin' she'd been born an' brought up on a saddle, fell for it plenty hard."

"Oh, so it was Ed Winter she picked up, was it?" Stockridge said. "I spotted him for one of our boarders, but I was too far away to tell which one. Only I bet a hat she didn't know him!"

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"Or else she knowed him too well!" sniggered the third man, who had been addressed as Mose. He was dark-skinned and swarthy, with hair as black as an Indian's. One of his eyes was sightless, and its crookedly drooping lid gave a sinister cast to his face. He spoke without an accent, but the big gold hoops in his ears and the gaudy silk sash twisted about his waist stamped him as a half-breed Mexican. He, too, was an employee of the Long Bar Circle.

"More'n likely, Mose," assented Bull Stockridge. "She sure snuggled up to him like all get out when he grabbed her hoss an' held it whiles she climbed down. An' she had her hand on his arm whiles they stood there, talkin' an' laughin' an' havin' a high old time. *P-p-teuu!*" He spat again, disgustedly. "Kinda makes yuh sick, don't it? I'm rough an' ready an' easy goin' enough, I reckon, an' I can respect a honky-tonk girl; she's got to eat an' she mebbe can't get a livin' no other way.

"But what I says, they's a time an' a place for all that. An' if a girl ain't got no modesty nor decency a-tall, an' flaunts herself brazen, the way Kit Kenniston's been doin' lately, then it ain't no wonder the respectable womenfolks in town is lookin' down their noses at her, an' the menfolks are startin' to talk an' say—"

Stockridge stopped rather abruptly in the middle of his sentence, affecting to be greatly surprised and embarrassed at sight of the tall, well set up figure of Gale Chandler, who had all at once loomed almost at his elbow in the doorway of the store.

If Bull had not spent the better part of the past twenty-four hours in the barroom of the Big Horn, he would have shown more judgment than to attempt to bait a man of Chandler's reputation and known skill—especially since Chandler was foreman of the ranch owned by Kit Kenniston and her sister. But the whiskey he had imbibed had undermined his habitual caution. Having seen the young man enter the store, he had yielded to the temptation to indulge his always questionable sense of humor.

"Why, hello there, Chandler!" he began a lame greeting. "I ain't set eyes on yuh for a long time. I was just a-sayin'—" He stopped again, glanced sidewise at his two companions and from them to the little group of town loafers who had collected at the bottom of the steps, grinning listeners to the conversation.

But his simulated confusion, if convincing to some of the members of his audience, was certainly of no avail to impress Gale Chandler, who had lived too long in the neighborhood to cherish any illusions in regard to the owner of the Long Bar Circle. He did not believe for an instant that Stockridge was the sort to care how a woman behaved.

There were plenty of people who might have been taken in by Bull Stockridge's pose of the bluff, breezy, warm-hearted rancher, whose old fashioned ideals of true Western womanhood had been revolted and shocked by "short hair an' paint, bare arms an' breeches," but Gale happened not to be one of them.

From under the broad brim of his gray sombrero, his eyes, a little narrowed and full of a hard, cold scorn, swept over the group on the porch and came to rest on Stockridge's face.

"Yeah, I heard what yuh were sayin', Stockridge. Yuh'll excuse me for hornin' into a private conversation, I hope"—he put a slight, sardonic tone into his voice—"but for a man that's got his health an' is aimin' to keep it, yo're makin' too much noise with yore mouth. I knew a feller once brought on heart trouble that way—a mighty bad attack it was, too. Yuh get me?"

The loafers on the steps had stopped grinning. What had seemed spicily amusing before Gale's appearance was quite likely to develop into a different sort of entertainment altogether. Gale had worked on the Kenniston ranch for years; he had been like a devoted son to Christopher Kenniston before

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the latter's death, since when he had had virtual charge of the place. To speak slightingly of Kit Kenniston in his hearing was to court trouble of the worst kind—and Bull Stockridge had said plenty!

Open-mouthed and staring, the loafers waited to see what would happen.

"Now, now, Chandler, don't get high-heeled, will yuh?" Stockridge said placatingly. "If I'd knowed yuh was hereabouts, I'd 've swallowed my tongue 'fore I'd said anything about Kit—"

"Miss Kenniston to you, Stockridge!" the young foreman cut in brusquely. "That's if yo're speakin' *to* her, passin' the time o' day, which is all that'll be necessary any time. As for speakin' *of* her, yuh'll be well advised not to from now on, no matter whether I can hear yuh or not."

"What's the idea of yore threatenin' me, huh?" demanded Stockridge, bristling. "Ain't I apologized? What more do yuh want? I got a right to talk to Mose an' Big Charlie, ain't I, without yore givin' me orders? This here was just a little private talk just between friends, an' I sure don't aim to stand for no back-chat about it from you, Chandler!"

A challenging note had crept into Bull Stockridge's voice; the color was darkening in his full, ruddy face. He hadn't originally intended to quarrel with the Kennistons' foreman, but merely to provoke him; and then, with the crowd all enjoying the joke, to make a hypocritical apology which should be no real apology at all.

But he had erroneously estimated the effect of the Big Horn whiskey; he had gone too far. Instead of a few critical remarks, he had said things that had aroused Chandler's wrath. Stockridge was beginning to feel himself insulted now, and that by an impudent young upstart whom he could break in two with one hand. Who the hell was this Gale Chandler, anyway, to dare to call him to account for anything that he chose to say?

"A little private talk that was just between friends," he repeated, raising his voice, already loud enough. "An' no harm done nor meant, Chandler. An' yuh sashay out an' tell me—"

"Just between friends I'll tell yuh again," Gale interrupted in a quiet, level tone, "to lay off that particular kind of 'little private talk' from now on. There's been more harm done in this world by careless shootin' off of mouths than by shootin' off guns, Stockridge. Now I've warned yuh twice. Three times—"

"Oh, yuh've warned me twice, have yuh?" snarled the big man. He let go of the porch post against which he had been lounging and lunged forward, his huge fists clenched and swinging. "Yuh're George Washington an' Napoleon an' General Grant an' Gawd a-mighty, all rolled into one, ain't yuh! An' yuh've warned me twice that I ain't to dast mention the name of yore precious little Kit, who's no better than she should be when she goes pickin' up strange men on the—"

And that was as far as he got. The look that had all at once leaped into Gale Chandler's eyes had sent the loafers scattering away from the porch steps like dry leaves before the winter wind. But the young man did not reach for either of the heavy, black-butted forty-fives that he wore swung low on the front of his thighs, the tips of the holsters tied down with rawhide thongs.

Instead, he dexterously side-stepped the savage blow which Stockridge aimed at him, ducked, and, with the swiftness of a snake striking, whipped his fist up to the point of the ranchman's jaw.

Perfectly timed and directed, it was as neat a knock-out as ever was delivered in a prize ring. The sound of its impact echoed through the still air like the crack of a pistol shot. Bull Stockridge was lifted literally right off his feet. His head snapped back, his knees buckled under him, and his heavy body went down on the floor of the porch with a crash that shook the building.

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Big Charlie Barnett cursed and went for his gun. The fingers of One-Eyed Mose, the half-breed, darted toward the long-blade knife which he always wore concealed in the folds of his sash. But both gestures were arrested before they could be completed, for Gale's gray eyes, hard as chilled steel, were looking now over the sights of a Colt that had somehow mysteriously appeared in his left hand. Just how he had managed to draw and level it with such uncanny speed, neither of the Stockridge men knew; but there it was.

With his other hand, the knuckles of which were slightly abraded where they had come in contact with the blond giant's jaw, the young foreman waved the two back against the wall of the store.

"Now, then," he said, and his voice was as cold and piercing as his eyes, "listen to me, an' pack what I'm tellin' yuh away careful in yore minds so yuh won't never forget it. Yo're a bunch of filthy-minded, foul-mouthed skunks, an' if I was to ventilate the lot of yuh, the air in this man's town 'ld be a lot sweeter."

Big Charlie started to say something, thought better of it and listened instead, as Gale went on slowly and distinctly:

"By good rights, I'd ought to give the pair of yuh the same dose yore boss got, an' learn yuh where yuh head in at. But there's been talk enough, understand me? Now, yuh can hoist that hunk o' rancid hawg-meat aboard a cayuse an' make tracks for yore dude outfit, else I'll see to it that yuh take a longer trip. *Sabe?*"

Neither of the men could pretend to misunderstand. They had been drinking, but they were sober enough to realize that Gale meant exactly what he said. They were to do no more talking about Kit Kenniston, unless they were prepared to match shots with the swiftest man on the draw in Wedge County. They, along with Bull Stockridge, would have to swallow the public humiliation they had suffered, or take some thoroughly unpleasant consequences.

Either alternative was distasteful, but now was not an auspicious time to say so. Big Charlie mumbled something about not wanting any trouble with an old acquaintance, and One-Eyed Mose, his thin lips wreathed in a slyly, ingratiating smile, begged Mister Chandler to remember that *he* had said nothing at all. It was unthinkable that he should speak ill of a lady; and besides, he had always felt most friendly toward Mister Chandler.

"Yeah—that's why yuh started to pull a knife on me!" Gale said dryly. "That'll be about all, Mose. Git!" He shoved his gun back into its holster, turned, and re-entered the store. There he almost collided with old Pop Corrigan who, forgetting his rheumatism in the excitement, had run to the door to hear the quarrel.

"'Twould 've served 'em right if yuh'd done what yuh said—let daylight through the lot!" declared the old man. "Foulin' a sweet, good girl's name with their slimy tongues thataway! By golly, my blood's a mite thin an' chilly these days, but it was nigh to boilin' there, Gale! They come round here again, an' I'll run 'em off with a scattergun. I won't have 'em on my premises!"

"Well, that won't be no money outta yore pocket," Gale remarked sourly. "They do their tradin' in the city, anyways."

Not all of Pop's indignation was assumed, of course; but it was a fact that he had a long-standing grievance against the Stockridge outfit, because they favored him with little or no custom.

"Huh!" he grunted, hobbling back to the cash drawer to make change for the money Gale handed him. "They sure did prod yuh where the hair was short, didn't they, son? Still, yuh needn't to snap a body's head off. I knowed Kit Kenniston afore she could walk, an' I'm mighty fond of her, too. I seen this whole performance of hers yester-

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day, myself. Yuh might tell her for me that she oughtn't to ride that locoed buckskin. I'm s'prised yuh let her, Gale. Nor she oughtn't to herd too much with them Eastern dudes. They has been the least mite o' talk 'mongst—"

"What the hell business is it of yores who she herds with?" demanded Gale. "Anybody ask yuh to pick her friends an' her hawsses for her, did they?"

He waited for no answer, but swept his change into his pocket and strode out, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER II

Little Sister

GALE CHANDLER was in anything but an enviable state of mind when presently he galloped out of the little cowtown of Silver Forks. He turned his horse into the winding, hilly trail leading to the Upside-Down K, the brand from which the small ranch belonging to Kit Kenniston and her elder sister, Martha, took its name.

A two-gun fighter whose fame had spread throughout the Southwest, far beyond the confines of Wedge County where he had been born and had spent most of his twenty-six years, the young foreman was nevertheless no trouble-hunter. Self-reliant and self-respecting, he kept out of all arguments when it was decently possible, preferring to live in peace and amity with his neighbors, whether he liked them or not.

His good nature was almost proverbial. He had never been known to lose his head or his temper, and old-timers in Silver Valley were wont to declare that his word was better than another man's bond.

He was an indefatigable worker. However, when there was any time for play—which was seldom, for the Kennistons were poor and the outfit chronically short-handed—he played just as hard.

Tall, superbly muscled, straight as an arrow, he was fine-looking rather than actually handsome. His clear, dark gray eyes were deep-set under strongly marked brows. His well shaped head was covered with thick, crisp brown hair, with just the barest suggestion of a wave in it. Features clean-cut and tanned by the sun and wind of the open range, looked almost as if they might have been sculptured from bronze; and he had a half whimsical, half quizzical smile that was of a most engaging boyishness.

Although he had never had any use whatever for Bull Stockridge, up until that afternoon his outward relations with the Long Bar Circle spread, the grazing lands of which adjoined those of the Upside-Down K on the south, had been amicable enough.

But the incident on the porch of Pop Corrigan's general store had changed all that. Not only had it split wide open the thin veneer of tolerance with which your bred-in-the-bone cattleman covers his lofty disdain for those who have forsaken the primitive traditions of the range and gone dude. It had also forced out into the open all the latent hostility which had slumbered restlessly for years beneath that flimsy surface shell.

A conceited, boastful man, given to bragging about his brawn, Bull Stockridge would never forget nor forgive that humiliating blow he had received. It had injured his vanity a good deal more than it had his jaw, and he would be even more certain to plan prompt reprisals for that reason. Gale knew that he had made an ugly and implacable enemy of the fellow, and of every man among the choice collection of gunmen and picturesque scoundrels who drew his pay and obeyed his orders.

War had been tacitly declared there on the porch of Pop Corrigan's general store; a war that would be all the more relentless and deadly because it would be fought under cover and by any weapons, fair or foul, that came easiest to hand.

But it was no fear of future menace to his own safety that furrowed Gale

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Chandler's forehead and etched sharp little lines of worry at the corners of his wide, generous mouth. He was not worrying about himself at all; his mind was too full of Kit Kenniston and the mad risk which the girl had carelessly —perhaps deliberately—run the day before.

As Big Charlie Barnett had said, Kit had been born and brought up in a saddle, so to speak. She was a good deal more at home astride leather than in a veranda rocking chair. But her skill as a rider wouldn't save her when that buckskin horse started acting up; nor did it excuse her.

The more he thought of it, the more angry he got. Finally, when he rode through the gateway into the ranch yard and saw the object of his perturbation sitting on the top step of the shallow porch, his usually placid face looked like a thundercloud. He swung out of the saddle and grounded his reins.

Miss Kit Kenniston—baptized Christine—lifted long, curling dark lashes to give him a glance of casual indifference.

"It's pretty hot today, isn't it, Gale?" she said. "And you're awfully late getting back, aren't you? Marty's been waiting for that sugar. I told her she'd better not bother to make any cookies —the whole kitchen's like a bake-oven —but she said she didn't mind. I sure hope it cools off after sundown." She patted her mouth with the back of one small, capable brown hand as she yawned frankly, revealing a set of very white and even teeth behind lips that were red with the vivid, thin-skinned redness of a child's lips, and quite liberally be-carmined besides.

Now, Kit Kenniston needed no make-up; her own natural coloring was almost flawlessly exquisite. But there was rouge on her cheeks; the gracefully arching eyebrows had been artificially darkened, and the impudent little nose had been powdered with a very lavish hand. Her hair, a bright, ruddy gold where the sun, filtering through the porch vines, slanted across it, was smartly bobbed, and curled into a thousand little clinging tendrils about her ears and at the nape of her slim neck.

She was wearing the riding breeches and open-throated shirt which Bull Stockridge had so pointedly criticized. Her feet, in their small, trim, high-heeled boots were crossed in a lazy attitude; and between her thumb and forefinger, she held a lighted, straw-tipped cigarette.

A more sophisticated—or perhaps less annoyed — person than Gale Chandler would have noticed that the make-up had been put on unskilfully, and that the cigarette smoking was an accomplishment which had certainly not been mastered. Also, he would have seen that the pose of the lithe figure, limned against the dark background of the thick climbing vines, had been studied with a view to producing a strikingly theatrical effect.

But the young man was as oblivious to that part of it as he was to the provocatively appealing charm which all the girl's most earnest efforts had failed quite to conceal or disguise. The "paint an' pants, bare arms an' breeches," to say nothing of the straw-tipped cigarette which had not been included in Mr. Stockridge's catalogue of iniquities, were all glaringly in evidence; but he ignored them wholly. Ignored, too, the pointedly indifferent smile, the indolent greeting, driving without preamble straight to the heart of the matter which had been bothering him all the way home.

"Look here, Kit, what's this I hear about yore ridin' that yellow buckskin hawss?" he demanded, standing over her. "I thought I told yuh I didn't want to ketch yuh on that dang critter again!"

"Well, you didn't catch me, did you?" Kit returned sweetly, looking off across the yard and taking a cautious puff of smoke.

Gale waited a moment for her to go on; but she appeared to think she had said all that was necessary. She yawned

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again, perhaps to cover up the fact that the taste of the cigarette was not to her liking, and with her little finger flicked off the cone of gray ash.

"Yuh rode him in to town yesterday, didn't yuh, huh?"

"Why, certainly I rode him! Any reason why I shouldn't?"

Just as if she didn't know the reason! Just as if nobody had ever suggested to her that it was neither wise nor safe to ride that buckskin! As if she were, actually, the reckless little fool her behavior indicated her to be! Confound her impudence! Gale swallowed hard.

Then, he said, "Kit, yuh know I hadn't ought to have to speak to yuh about it again. Yuh know I carried yuh round in my arms when yuh wasn't knee-high to a pack rat, an' think as much of yuh as if yuh was my own blood sister. If it wasn't for that I'll be danged if I wouldn't let yuh go on ahead in yore own fool-kid way, an' likely bust yore neck, 'long as yuh seem so bent on doin' it!—But I just can't—"

"So sweet of you, Gale!" murmured the girl, with airy sarcasm, giving him another half-glance from her eyes that were so deeply violet blue that they looked almost black under the drooping lids. Daintily she raised the cigarette again; but the slim fingers holding the white paper cylinder trembled ever so little, and the even, white teeth were caught in the rouged lower lip. "It's just wonderful to have you take such a brotherly interest in me, Gale!"

Gale glowered in true brotherly fashion. He knew perfectly well that Kit was being calculatedly aggravating; but, wholly blind to the motive which prompted her, he set her attitude down to "kid cussedness." And he had missed that little significant trembling of her fingers altogether.

He said, unwontedly harsh-voiced, "It'll be just wonderful if they fetch yuh in one of these days all bit an' tromped to a pulp, too, I reckon! Kit, yuh've been warned time an' again that that buckskin ain't safe for yuh to ride—for nobody to ride. It ain't just that he's mean; he's showed signs of bein' a killer. Why, Nasty says the other hawsses shy away from him out on the range, an' yuh know what that means. Yuh've got no more business on his back than yuh have smokin' a-top of a keg of dynamite, Kit."

"Dear me, you are in a lather, aren't you?" smiled Kit condescendingly, as she might have smiled at the babblings of a small fractious child. "Sorry I can't share your qualms, Gale. A killer? Nonsense! You know, I think he's a perfectly dandy horse. I get a big kick out of riding him."

"Oh, yeah?" rumbled Gale. "An' yuh mebbe get a big kick outa makin' a circus sideshow of yoreself, an' havin' the whole town talkin' about yuh besides, huh? It's about time yuh quit havin' yore own sweet way, come hell or high water, young lady. Yuh use about as much common sense as a day-old calf—exceptin' that the calf does mebbe realize its mammy knows more'n it does!"

"Meaning that I ought to do everything my dear, kind, grown up 'mammy' Gale tells me to, and never, never, do anything he might not approve of in his wisdom? Is that it?"

"Meanin'," retorted Gale, somehow infuriated by her little mocking smile, "that it ain't so nice for Martha an' me to have all the bums in the saloons sayin' yo're a disgrace to yore bringin' up, even if yuh do have a heap of fun seein' how crazy yuh can act! If yuh think I want my little sister's name all smeared over with mud by every drunken loafer that sees her showin' off—takin' up with tee-total strangers an' huggin' their arms right on the main street—"

"Ah!" murmured Kit, her eyes sparkling, her brows arched high. "Is that all for this afternoon? Sure you've quite finished for now?"

"An' keep away from that yellow buckskin, understand me? I won't have yuh ridin' him. He's plumb dan-

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gerous. Yuh ain't funny nor clever, an' yuh ain't smart, imitatin' the ways of them wild women yuh met at school in the East—not one bit. Go wash that paint off yore face—an' if yuh must smoke, smoke real cigarettes, not them things made outa goat-hair tied up with straw! I'm tellin' yuh for yore own good, Kit. If it wasn't that yuh was just a kid, an'—"

"Who do you think you're talking to, anyway?" burst out the girl, her cheeks scarlet under their rouge. "Coming home and repeating saloon gossip to me—criticizing me! How dare you, Gale Chandler? If you'd stay out of those cheap honkytonks and attend to the work you're paid to do on this ranch, we'd all be better off. I've heard enough from you. Go run around the corral and cool down!" She tossed her bright head. "Saloon gossip—and you listen to it!"

"An' *you* cause it!" Gale came back at her, flushing in his turn. "But that's no matter to yuh, huh? It don't matter to yuh that the little girl I've thought of an' loved like a sister gets herself talked about like she was one of—I mean, like she—"

"Sister be—be damned!" The girl's teeth came together with a vicious little snap. For all her jaunty defiance, she was very near to tears; but not for worlds would she have let him know it. "I'm not your sister, and you're not my nurse, either! I'm nearly twenty—quite old enough to do as I please, without being dictated to by my own hired hand! If you want to know—yes, I'd a heap rather be talked about than talked at, lectured and ordered around and generally treated as if I were an irresponsible baby. You're impertinent and insulting and I—I— Oh, go away from me!" she shrieked.

"Sister!" she fairly hissed, under her breath as, with a shrug, he turned his shoulder to her and strode past her up the steps. "Sister! Oh, you numbskull—you blind, stupid dolt!"

She did not look after the tall, well set-up figure, stalking through the kitchen doorway, and she would have been able to see only a blurred outline of it if she had. Her eyes were misty with unshed tears, and her pretty lips were quivering. She was angry and disappointed and hurt so that she wanted nothing so much as to run away somewhere and hide her head. She had set the scene, arranged everything with such care, and he hadn't noticed a thing—not a single thing. Oh, it was maddening!

She threw away the stub of her cigarette and blinked down at it as it lay in the dust of the yard by the hitch-rack, a tiny fleck of red lip-stick on its shining straw tip.

"Why, I might as well be a—a fence post!" she told herself miserably. Forgetful of the make-up which she had taken so much time to apply, she dabbed at her cheek, rubbing away a little salty trickle that had left a trail through the rouge and powder. "I'm just Kit, the kid, to him, no matter what I do. 'Little sister!' Oh, damn! Damn! Damn! For two bits, I'd—"

She sprang to her feet, breathing fast, a-glow with anger.

"I'll make you!" she muttered over and over again, beating one savage little fist against her thigh the while. "Gale Chandler, you big, blind, fumbling imbecile of a mole—I'll *make* you see!"

She ran down the steps and hurried off across the yard in the direction of the corral.

"Little sister," indeed!

CHAPTER III

American Beauties

GALE slammed the screen door of the kitchen behind him only a little less noisily than he had slammed the door of Pop Corrigan's store. Kit had driven him nearer to losing his temper than he had ever been in his life, and her final thrust had been a deadly shot.

Not that she had been really serious when she had referred to him as a mere

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hired hand whose criticism was an impertinence; but her words had hurt him, just the same. After all, it was true that she was one of the owners of the ranch, and he in her employ. And she was nearly twenty, old enough to do as she pleased, as she had said. Only, she wasn't going to please to ride that yellow buckskin horse again, and perhaps risk her life, just to prove her independence. Not if he, Gale Chandler, knew it!

She could ruin a flawless complexion with cheap cosmetics, if she wanted to; she could smoke Turkish goat-hair cigarettes that smelled as if someone were shoeing a horse. She could even, Gale thought bitterly, scrape acquaintance with strange men on the public streets, and thereby offend every strait-laced matron in Wedge County. Those things, one was obliged to admit, were her own business. But riding that star-faced buckskin was out!

"What have you and Kit been arguing so heatedly about, Gale?" Martha Kenniston wanted to know, as he set his packages down on the table where she was busy mixing dough in a pottery bowl.

"Why, about two minutes!" Gale responded, some of the good humor returning to his smile. There was never any friction between him and Martha, whom he liked and respected. She was always the same, he told himself, steady and dependable, kind and friendly. You always knew where you stood with Martha; she had mighty good sense. "Part of that time, I was tellin' her it wasn't so smart to go chancin' a busted neck for no good reason a-tall, an' the other part she was tellin' me where she thought I'd ought to head in at.

"I reckon," he added, grinning, "I rubbed her fur the wrong way, as per usual, Marty, meanin' what I said for her own good. It didn't set so well, though, an' she ups an' gives me to understand that she won't— Hello! What's all this here?"

"All this here" was a big, oblong pasteboard box—a florist's box, such as was unique in Silver Valley. The cover bore the name and address of a well known firm in the county seat, some three hundred miles away, and also the legend, in a four-inch flourish of script: "Say It with Flowers."

The corner of a calling-card protruded from the rumpled mass of waxed paper, and Gale scowled involuntarily as he saw the name it bore. No flowers were in sight; but a single great red petal, withered and dried now, indicated that the box had contained American Beauty roses. And American Beauty roses might be expected to appear in a small ranch house in the Southwest just about as often as a prairie chicken grows a set of teeth!

Martha Kenniston laughed at Gale's amazed expression. She was an attractive young woman, several years her sister's senior, rather plump, with fine brown eyes, a humorous mouth, and thick, honey-colored hair which she wore brushed straight back from her forehead and gathered into a simple knot at the nape of her neck.

"I don't wonder you look astonished, Gale," she said. "When I saw Hasty"—Hasty Carson was one of the punchers on the Upside-Down K and an incorrigible practical joker—"packing that big box in this noon, I thought he must have been sitting up nights to think up a new one. And then, when Kit took the cover off and I saw it wasn't one of his jokes after all, you could have knocked me over with a feather. Roses—and with stems nearly a yard long! Of course, they were all withered, but they must have been glorious."

"Miss Kit certainly has an enthusiastic admirer somewhere," a slightly built, rather pale-looking man who was sitting in a rocking chair by the window remarked, with a nod of greeting to Gale. "Somebody had something to say with flowers!"

"Somebody with more money than brains, though, if you ask me," Martha remarked tartly. "Those roses cost

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twenty-five dollars if they cost a penny. If they'd come for me, I should have fainted in the flour barrel. But Kit never turned a hair. You'd have thought she was in the habit of getting 'em every day in the week. She lugged out the old onion-pickle crock—the only thing in the house big enough to hold 'em—and took them up to her room. And not a word about where they came from, though we were consumed with curiosity, weren't we, Mr. Stanley?"

The rather pale-looking man in the rocking chair laughed.

"Well, Miss Martha, if it was her very first bouquet, perhaps she wanted to keep the donor's name to herself."

"If that was her idea, she'd ought to have taken the card along, too," Gale observed dryly. He picked the pasteboard up and read the name aloud. "Mr. Edward H. Winter. Know him, Marty? He's a writer feller that's stayin' over at Stockridge's dude ranch, I understand. I haven't met up with him, an' I didn't know Kit had before yesterday; I thought he was a stranger to her."

Martha Kenniston shook her head, a little puzzled.

"Winter?" she repeated. "Edward Winter? No; I've never heard her speak of any such person, and it's not like Kit to be secretive." She opened the bag of sugar Gale had set on the table. "What do you mean, you didn't know she'd met him before yesterday?"

"Why, nothing. Only—" Gale hesitated, glancing doubtfully at Stanley. He had no reason to distrust the latter, whom Martha had taken to board at the ranch about a week before; but he didn't like him, either, and unreasonably resented his presence as a member of the household.

That was Kit's doing, too! A friend in Silver City had introduced them, and Stanley, who complained of poor health, had asked to be recommended to a good boarding place—not a hotel, but a private home where he could have rest and quiet.

Gale didn't like having the Upside-Down K turned into a boarding house, and he didn't like to discuss Kit before anyone who was almost a stranger, either.

However, Robert Stanley had turned away and was looking out of the window again, having apparently lost interest in the conversation. He seemed to be paying no attention, and Gale had not seen the surprised expression which had crossed his face at the mention of the name of Edward Winter.

Behind his neatly tailored back, Martha shook her head reprovingly at Gale. She did not share his sentiments about her first "paying guest," whom she liked very much indeed personally, and whose board money she was more than thankful to receive. Making both ends meet on the Upside-Down K was a full-time job for her.

"Well?" she prompted, reaching for the rolling pin. "Tell me what it is, Gale. What's Kit been up to now? I thought she looked a little like the cat that had been at the milk jug!"

"Why, it's nothin' much, I reckon, Marty," the young man answered reluctantly. "Only—well, Bull Stockridge an' a couple of his bad hats was down at the store whiles I was there, talkin' kind o' wide an' loose about her. I just naturally had to call 'em."

He added a brief, carefully expurgated version of what had been said and done; but Martha was astute enough to read between the lines and guess at some of the details he had omitted.

"Kit's a little idiot," she said shortly, frowning. "As for this man Winter, I don't know where she met him, or how or when. Perhaps when she was visiting in Silver City some time, or maybe she ran across him around here on the range somewhere.

"But it certainly must have been before yesterday, or he wouldn't have had time to get those roses sent down by mail. And why she's being so mysterious about him, and so silly as to give folks ground for bandying her name about with his, floors me. She's old

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enough to know better." Martha thumped the dough energetically and bobbed her head up and down. "I'll have to rake her over the coals a bit, I reckon; she needs a good talking to."

"Well, whiles yo're about it, yuh might mebbe persuade her to use a little sense about the hawsses she picks to ride, too, Marty," Gale said. "She won't listen to me nor take my advice. The gossip about her an' this Winter, whoever he is, won't harm her—though I'd've been just as well satisfied if there hadn't been any—but that buckskin hawss is something else again.

"There's a good blood-strain in him, an' I was figurin' on usin' him for a stud, but I've had to give up the idea. Hasty thinks he's dangerous, too. We've about made up our minds he's a man-killer, an' we've got to get rid of him. I told Kit before to keep away from him, or she'd likely get herself killed; an' then yesterday, she rides him into town. She's—"

Almost like the echo of his words came a sharp, excited exclamation from Robert Stanley.

"My God! Chandler, that girl'll be killed!"

And from the yard came a sudden, heavy trampling of hoofs, mingled with a sound that drove the blood from Martha Kenniston's cheeks—the shrill, high-pitched squealing of a maddened horse.

CHAPTER IV

Drastic Action

GALE was already at the door. Before Robert Stanley had burst out with that horrified exclamation, his own ears had warned him of the imminence of tragedy. He knew instantly that Kit had not taken her defiance out in words, but had promptly set herself to prove to him in what contempt she held his repeated warnings.

In a flash, he had yanked open the screen, flung it back, and dashed out onto the porch. Midway between the steps and the gate of the small corral was Kit, astride the buckskin and almost hidden from view in the cloud of dust that was billowing up from under the pounding hoofs.

None of the punchers would have roped the animal for her, for they all shared Gale's growing suspicions of the beast's true nature. She must have gone to the corral by herself, saddled up, and started to ride toward the yard gate when the cunning, four-footed fiend had at last decided to reveal himself.

And, once that decision had finally taken form in the creature's warped equine brain, not even the most skilful and seasoned of top-riders could have controlled him. Kit Kenniston was as helpless as a chip in a hurricane—and she knew it.

But she was game. She did not even cry out. With the drabbled, tear-streaked rouge standing out in startling contrast to the chalky whiteness of her face, she was holding onto the saddle with the grip of desperation. To be shaken loose and thrown meant an instant and hideous death; and the girl was fighting with every atom of strength and courage she possessed to keep her seat on the back of the four-footed yellow cyclone.

Ears laid back and flattened against his big, bony head, flecks of bloody foam flying from his open jaws, the buckskin was rearing, plunging, pitching in a very orgy of maniacal frenzy. Stiff-legged, he would strike the ground with a force that racked his rider's every bone, only on the instant to leave it in a whirling rebound, turning his body in the air and landing again at a different angle. A sudden downward thrust of a shoulder, an arching upward leap, and he had swapped ends. Then again the bone-racking jolt of that stiff-legged landing, while his neck came round and his bared teeth met in a vicious snap that missed the girl's leg by only the fraction of an inch.

His frame seemed made of coiled steel springs, every one of them in vio-

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lent action at once. Madness and demoniac blood-lust glared from his wildly rolling eyes. To throw that hated human burden from his back, to crush and trample it in the dust, to mangle and kill—to slake with blood the insane fever within him. . . .

Impossible to quell him with either bullet or rope. A shot would bring him down, but it was just as likely to find its mark in the tossing, swaying body of the girl. And to throw him with a riata would be to throw her also—to give him the very chance for which he was striving with every devilish trick at his command. There was only one thing to do—and Gale Chandler did it.

He cleared the porch steps in a single bound, leaped into the saddle of his own mount, and spurred across the yard, shouting at the top of his voice for Kit to hang on—not to let go for her life.

Probably she did not even hear him. The struggle had lasted for only a minute or two, but already her senses were reeling. She was nearly spent. Earth and sky were blurred together in a swirling kaleidoscope of choking saffron dust, and in her brain giant hammers were pounding until the sound of them merged into one vast, humming roar that deafened her.

Blood had started from her nostrils. She was only half conscious, but still she clung to the saddle as a limpet clings to a wave-washed rock. Still she tried, automatically, to rise in her stirrups to break the shock of those terrible downward plunges, to sway and swing in a mechanical effort to balance herself.

But the strain was unendurable. Such an unequal battle could have but one end—and that a speedy one. As the girl weakened, the yellow demon under her seemed to grow stronger and more resourceful. He had tried a dozen different devilish tricks, but there was still one left in his repertory that could not fail.

Vaguely, as if in some awful half waking dream, Kit Kenniston knew that he was getting ready to use it. She sensed, rather than felt, the gathering of the great muscles. She tossed in the violent upward lurch as the buckskin reared, snorting and squealing, for the dreaded and deadly backthrow. There was no way to prevent it, no way to escape it—and the girl was too nearly exhausted to take advantage of it, if there had been one.

Her eyes were closed as the bawling brute reared erect on its hind legs, its forehoofs flailing the air. A sickening wrench, a shock that drove the breath from her lungs, and her fingers were jerked from their hold on the saddle. Then she was falling—falling—through an eternity of horror as the maddened buckskin hurled itself over backward to the ground.

But Kit was not beneath him, crushed by the saddle horn and the weight of the crashing body. In the split-second that elapsed between the start and the finish of the beast's murderous gyration, hoofs had thundered across the yard, a rider raced up through the swirling dust cloud.

An arm flashed out, caught the girl about the waist, and swept her from the saddle, snatching her from the very jaws of the death-trap she had set for herself. Clutched in a grip that was like a band of steel about her, she was held tight against Gale Chandler's body and borne away to safety as his mount raced at top speed past the four-footed killer.

It was all over in far less time than it takes to tell it. Martha Kenniston had but just reached the top of the porch steps, and Stanley was emerging from the doorway behind her when Gale brought his horse to a stop and swung out of the saddle, still holding Kit's dusty, disheveled form. She was dizzy and half dazed from the ordeal through which she had just passed; she could not, for a moment, realize that it was over and that she had come out of it unscathed, except for a few bruises, a nosebleed, and a headache that would persist for a day or two.

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But it was not all weakness nor even gratitude to her rescuer that made her cling to Gale's supporting arm and hide her small, pale face against his shoulder. And it wasn't all relief at her escape from the buckskin horror that made her tremble so, as she tried to get her breath.

"There, there, little girl," Gale soothed her, in a voice that was oddly unsteady. He didn't know that it was unsteady, any more than he knew why his heart was pounding so furiously. If he had, and had attempted to analyze the reason, he would most certainly have ascribed both phenomena to the fact that Kit was his little sister—hadn't he toted her around in his arms when she was only a bit of a baby?—and she'd just had the closest sort of a shave. "There, there, Kit; it's all over an' yuh ain't hurt a mite. Don't cry, Kit, girl, don't. Yuh—yuh ain't hurt, are yuh, Kit?"

"N-no. I—I'm all right," she gasped out. "Only shaken and—and winded. He—he got his head down, Gale, and before I knew it, he—he— Oh, Gale, next time, I—I'll be—"

She meant to say that next time she'd be a little less cock-sure of herself, but her breath gave out in the middle of the sentence, and Gale, as badly shaken as she, though in a different way, misunderstood. Which was pardonable, because the Kit Kenniston he knew had never clung nor melted—was, indeed, the gay, defiant and rather headstrong person whose chief delight in life seemed to be to flaunt her contempt for his opinions.

"Next time!" he echoed, all the tenderness, which he had not realized was there, gone from his voice. "Next time yuh'll—"

"I—I'm so sorry, Gale. He—got his head down, you see. I mean, I ought to have—you warned me—I—I won't—"

"Yuh little fool! Yo're damn right, yuh won't!" The words cracked like a whip, and stung her like one. Over the tumbled brightness of her hair, Gale had been watching the sweating buckskin regain its feet, blood- and foam-flecked, its flanks heaving after its tremendous exertions, but eyeing him and eyeing Kit with that insane madness—beginning to edge toward them cunningly.

Kit could not see, for her face was still pressed against Gale's shoulder. But she heard the roar of his forty-five that followed hard on his speech, and she jerked away from his loosened grasp as though he had struck her. He didn't trust her, then! He wouldn't take her word that she was sorry and wouldn't ever go near the horse again! He was tacitly accusing her of being a sneak and a liar, as well as a little fool!

Outraged pride brought the color flooding to her face, strengthened and steadied her shaking limbs. She drew herself up to her full height, her eyes flashing blue sparks. They were barely on a level with Gale Chandler's shoulder; and no girl, no matter how lovely she may be, is at her best when she has been shaken up badly enough to make her nose bleed. Yet, somehow, Kit Kenniston contrived to look dignified as well as furious.

"You coward!" she said. "You—you *gunman!* That's your only answer to any argument—a bullet!"

Now, for the benefit of those who do not know the distinction, it may be explained that a gunfighter uses his weapons on the side of law and order; a gunman is indifferent about sides, provided always that the one he takes pays the highest.

It was the second stab that Kit's tongue had delivered that day, and it cut deeper than the first—as she intended that it should. That Gale had just saved her life at some risk to his own, and had shot no innocent creature but a mad beast that was a menace to the safety of every human being it might reach, weighed with her not at all. She had flung her arms about Gale Chandler's neck, yielded to his caresses, babbled to him like any love-sick school girl—and he had pushed

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her roughly away and called her a little fool!

She was hurt and mortified to her very soul, but she held her head high as, without another word, she turned on her heels and marched back to the house.

Martha had run down the steps of the porch.

"Oh, Kit, darling, are you hurt?" she cried. "Your poor face—is it badly cut? Let me—"

"It's not cut at all, Marty. I'm perfectly all right."

"But, darling, you're a sight—all smeared with blood! You don't realize, child! It may be—why, you're dripping!"

That helped, of course. To be a sight—smeared with blood! Kit had forgotten that nosebleed. To act a fool, and look a mess! And to be pushed away, when she—

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't be such a fuss-cat, Marty!" snapped the tormented girl. "Let me pass, will you? I want to wash my face. I'm not hurt a particle, I tell you."

"Yeah, let her go wash her face, Marty," drawled Gale Chandler's sardonic voice behind her. "Not that the nose-paint's made it much worse; it's been needin' it all day."

The last straw? No! Just inside the gate, where, unperceived by her, he had drawn rein, sat a strange rider, an Easterner by the look of him and a very attractive one. Kit knew that he must have been witness to her humiliation, and that undoubtedly Gale had known he was there all the time.

A sob rose in her throat and choked her. She pushed past Martha and stumbled into the kitchen, expecting to find the way clear to the sanctuary of her own room. But in the doorway she bumped against Robert Stanley, who, for some reason, had not remained on the porch. If he sympathized with her, offered to help her, she would shriek in his face. But more than likely he would laugh. And if he did that—

He didn't, though. He merely drew aside to let her pass.

"That was a mighty game ride you made, Miss Kit," he remarked quietly, and turned away to his rocking chair by the window, behind the climbing vines.

"I—oh, thank you!" gasped Kit and dove for the stairs.

She would not cry. He wasn't worth it. She didn't care. She wouldn't give him that much satisfaction — even though he never knew it. She wouldn't shed a tear—no, not if it killed her!

Whereupon, Miss Kit Kenniston—born Christine — flung herself face downward on her bed, and sobbed as if her heart would break. She was very feminine indeed, was Kit—consistently so.

CHAPTER V

Apology by Proxy

IT was quite true that Gale had known of there being a third witness to the scene. However, it was not until the newcomer had dismounted and, costly sombrero in hand, stood bowing to Martha Kenniston that he recognized him as a man called Morello, who was a more or less permanent guest at the Long Bar Circle, Bull Stockridge's dude outfit.

The acquaintance of the two was of the slightest. Neither had made any effort to cultivate the other, perhaps because there existed between them that fundamental antagonism which, although it may never become manifest, is always present between men who are possessed of strength, insight, native acumen and all the essential qualities which go to make up a true leader, yet whose ideals are not only different but diametrically opposed.

Anthony Morello—Tony, to his intimates—was not a big man physically; but his was that deceptive strength concealed under an almost womanish exterior. When he moved his arms there were no betraying bulges to show the steel wires that were his muscles.

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The slight swarthiness of his skin was not due to wind or sun, but had that peculiar tinge which stamped him as belonging to one of the Latin races—Spanish or Italian—and his slight stature and aquiline features were also characteristic, as were his black hair and sloe-black eyes.

His clothes, rather too striking for strict good taste, were expensive. In fact, everything he owned was expensive; the trappings of his horse must have cost a large sum, and the animal itself was quite obviously of blooded stock. He had very small feet—in their highly polished leather riding boots they looked scarcely so large as Martha Kenniston's own—and extremely small hands, of which he was inordinately vain. On the little finger of the left he wore a square-cut emerald, flawless and of unusual size.

"May I introduce myself, Miss Kenniston? I am Anthony Morello, temporarily of the Long Bar Circle. At the request of Mr. Stockridge, whom I think you know, I rode over this afternoon to invite you all to attend a little affair we've scheduled for tomorrow—a sort of informal rodeo, you know, quite impromptu, or you'd have been asked before this. We're having the usual roping and shooting and riding contests, with prizes for successful competitors and all that sort of thing—just a neighborly good time."

"It's very good of you, Mr. Morello," Martha said, "but—"

"But when you can see such an amazing exhibition right in your own yard, it seems hardly worth while to ride for an hour or more over a dusty trail, eh?" laughed Morello. "I'm not exactly a stranger to the range, and I've witnessed some unusual feats; but your sister's courage and Chandler's masterful performance just now had me gasping. You certainly had your wits about you—and used them," he nodded, turning to Gale. "It was magnificent.

"And, by the way," he added, "I'm the bearer of a message to you, too, Chandler. You won't have any difficulty guessing what it is, and Stockridge will make his own apologies in person tomorrow, if you'll attend our little affair at the ranch. We're all looking forward to seeing you compete against our men. You—er—you'll be generous and overlook what's happened, won't you?"

It was on the tip of Gale's tongue to refuse the invitation. He knew what Bull Stockridge's apologies were worth—precisely nothing. There was no doubt that the dude ranchman hated him and would do him an injury at the first opportunity that offered itself.

And another thing: The rumors which were rife about what went on at the Long Bar Circle—the heavy drinking and gambling, the round of dissipation indulged in by the idle rich who made the dude ranch their playground—did not inspire him with any desire to take Kit and Martha Kenniston there. Rumors weren't always reliable, true; but where there was so much smoke there must be at least a spark of fire.

And if Mr. Anthony Morello were at all typical of the men whom the two girls would meet at the "rodeo," small blame to the conservative element in the neighborhood that deplored the existence of the place.

But Martha Kenniston gave the young foreman no chance to voice his refusal. She had heard no rumors, and she was not unfavorably impressed by Anthony Morello's handsome face and courteous manners. Her one idea was to act at once to heal the breach between Gale and Stockridge. The Upside-Down K was too poor to quarrel with its neighbors; and, besides, a reconciliation would do much to scotch the gossip about Kit, the real cause of the quarrel. A drunken man would say things which normally would never even enter his mind. Bull Stockridge had made offensive remarks, Gale had rebuked him. Stockridge had started a fight, and Gale had knocked him down. Now, Stockridge had sent an apology, and the incident

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would be closed if only Gale would not harbor a grudge.

She said, with her characteristic straightforwardness:

"Why, of course Gale will go, Mr. Morello. He's the last man in the world to want trouble with a neighbor, and as Mr. Stockridge admits that he was in the wrong, why, there's no more to be said. We'll be very glad to accept the invitation, thank you."

Morello bowed low.

"And I, for one, am very glad that you take the view you do, Miss Kenniston," he returned. "I see that Chandler has told you about what happened, and I am in a position to assure you that Mr. Stockridge is heartily sorry and ashamed of himself. His only excuse—and he admits that it's a pretty poor one—is that he was drunk and didn't realize what he was saying. When I talked to him, just before I started over here, he was deeply concerned and anxious that he should somehow set himself right with you all."

He turned to Gale again.

"Then we can count on you, Chandler?" he said. "I've heard so much about your wonderful marksmanship, I wouldn't like to miss seeing any match you were entered in. You'll surely come?"

"Yes, I'll come," Gale said without enthusiasm. Martha had put him in a position where he couldn't very well say anything else without appearing churlish and disagreeable. Anyway, if she accepted for herself, he couldn't let her go without him—not to a ranch like the Long Bar Circle.

"Splendid!" Morello applauded. "I told Stockridge that you weren't the sort of man to bear malice, and—" his small, sharp, even teeth showed in a flashing smile—"and agreed that he had gotten exactly what was coming to him down there at the store!"

Gale said nothing, and Morello spoke to Martha.

"And your sister, Miss Kit? Do you think she'll be feeling well enough to join us? I haven't had the pleasure of meeting her, but I've seen her several times—and Mr. Stockridge was especially anxious to make personal amends to her for his—"

"Oh, my sister will be all right by tomorrow," Martha said. "And she'll go, of course. We don't get too many good times at this season to pass one up. But if Bull Stockridge has any sense at all, he'll say nothing to her about his performance this morning, and you can tell him that for me, Mr. Morello. We'll all feel more comfortable if he lets the matter drop right here."

Morello bowed again.

"That shall be entirely as you wish, Miss Kenniston, and, I think, the wisest thing. Trampling over the same ground never helped to settle the dust, did it? Good afternoon, then—and I shall anticipate tomorrow with a great deal of pleasure."

When he had ridden away, a dashing, boldly handsome figure on his nettlesome thoroughbred, Martha Kenniston mounted the stairs to Kit's room. She found the girl curled up on the bed, one hand under her cheek, from which the rouge and blood and powder—and most of the tear-stains—had been washed.

"Well?" said Martha, pulling up a chair. "And what have you got to say for yourself, Kit—if anything?"

"Very little, Marty. You ought to know that." Kit's voice was a little flat, and her eyes were tired. "You've guessed."

"Not being a born idiot, yes; long ago. You've fallen heels over head in love with Gale Chandler, and for the past six months you've been exploding like a firecracker every so often, with the notion he'd hear the noise and sit up and take notice. What I want to know is where you picked up this Edward Winter person? How you got to know him so well that the town's talking about the two of you, and he sends you twenty-five dollars' worth of roses?"

"I didn't pick him up, Marty. And I

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don't know him at all. I never saw him before yesterday afternoon, when he stopped that confounded buckskin for me in Silver Forks."

Martha stared, half rose from her chair.

"Of course, if you want to lie to me, Kit—"

"I'm not lying, Marty, honestly. That's the absolute truth. You're thinking about that card that was in the box the roses came in. I didn't expect it would fool you, though I knew Gale would fall for it. That's why I left it there. Mr. Winter gave it to me yesterday, and I dropped it in the box myself when I took the roses out."

"But the roses themselves, Kit. Who—"

The girl on the bed made a little weary gesture.

"You might as well know the whole awful truth, I suppose, Marty. I bought them—sent them to myself. That is, I ordered them when I was in Silver City on my last visit."

"You—twenty-five dollars' worth, at least!"

"Oh, no! I gave the florist two bits for the packing and paid the postage, and asked him to send me a dozen roses when he had some in the shop that were withered so he couldn't sell 'em. They'd have been dead by the time they got here, anyway, even if they'd been sent fresh, and Gale wouldn't know the difference.

"You see, I thought"—the younger girl's slim brown fingers plucked at the pillow-slip—"I thought perhaps if—if he understood that other men were interested—didn't regard me as just a nice kid—he'd open his eyes and see that I'd grown up. He doesn't know it, Marty. He—he thinks I'm just his 'little sister'—and he treats me the same way he did when I wore my hair in a pigtail and had to be sent to scrub my hands before I came to the dinner table! I'm sure he doesn't care about anybody else, but he doesn't—he won't *see* me! He looks right through me, Marty, and sees the kid I was ten years ago. I—I—oh, I could kill him, Marty!"

"Or yourself," said Martha Kenniston dryly, though she had no lack of sympathy with her impetuous young sister. "Or else get him killed for resenting the things that people are saying about you—with plenty of reason, I gather. Kit, I gave you credit for more sense than to ride into town all painted up like a cheap chromo! It's all very well for those women from the Long Bar Circle to use make-up; they're Easterners, and nobody cares whether they do or not. But you belong to the West, and you know as well as I do that our men like their girls with the faces God gave 'em. With yours all plastered with rouge that looked as if you'd applied it with a trowel, and whooping down the main street at the Forks—"

"I didn't!" Kit denied indignantly. "I didn't have a bit of rouge or powder on yesterday or any other time when I was in town. But today I thought I'd see if Gale wouldn't notice, and he—I—Oh, drat him, Marty!" she wailed. "He makes me furious!"

"Yes; I figure he does," smiled Martha. "And you make him furious. You're both wasting a lot of perfectly good time."

She rose, as Kit suddenly sat bolt upright on the bed.

"What do you mean by that, Martha Kenniston?"

"Well, I might mean that Gale's a pretty busy man, and hasn't much time for chasing girls—too busy chasing cows," Martha said. "And then, again, I might mean that he's always taken care of you, and your doing fool stunts and raising Cain generally only keep him reminded of the crazy kid you don't want him to see. Impatient and reckless and headstrong, wanting your own way, trying anything once—that's Little Sister Kit all over. Too commonplace and familiar a spectacle to attract any but brotherly attention.

"But"—and Martha Kenniston's pleasant face wore a rather cryptic smile—

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"Kit, I didn't notice him letting go of you out there in the yard a while ago until that horse was getting set for another try. Think that over—and remember that about the last thing a preoccupied man sees is the one right under his nose!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Kit again. "Marty—"

"Ever hear tell about the pot calling the kettle black?" inquired Martha, and closed the door of the room behind her.

She knew what neither Gale Chandler nor her sister suspected—that the young foreman had been in love with Kit all his life long.

CHAPTER VI

At the Long Bar Circle

IF Gale had not relished the idea of Martha and Kit Kenniston meeting the men guests of the Long Bar Circle Ranch, he was still less enthusiastic when he saw the women.

There were only five or six of them, and they were all quite young—too young to be possessed of such self-assurance. They were strikingly pretty, overdressed, painted, and be-jeweled; and not one of them could, by any stretch of the imagination, be described as a gentlewoman.

Observing them with critical appraisal, Gale wondered. . . . The effusive cordiality with which they greeted the party from the Upside-Down K was too uniform to be genuine or spontaneous. It was as if they had been carefully coached to play a part—something which could scarcely have been done with guests, no matter how willing these were to cooperate in making a success of the party or trying to put the "natives" at their ease!

Gale could come to no other conclusion than that these girls were not guests but, actually, a part of the establishment; probably the major attraction which Bull Stockridge offered to the paunchy, middle-aged men of wealth to whom the place catered.

Nor was he the only one to receive this impression. Hasty Carson, standing beside him in the well kept yard, leaned close to whisper out of the corner of his mouth:

"Sho! If we knowed Kit an' Miss Martha had a hankerin' to meet them kind o' fancy dames, we could've found some for 'em long ago. I reckon one of us had ought to learn Bull Stockridge a couple of things or maybe three with a rawhide quirt. How about it, old-timer?"

Gale nodded, his face expressionless, but a glitter of cold anger in his gray eyes.

"One of us will, some day, I wouldn't wonder, Hasty. But today isn't the day. I don't reckon Martha's wise yet, an' I'm dead sure she didn't have a notion what she was runnin' into when she agreed we'd come over. I've smelt fish for some time, but I didn't suspect it was like this, or I'd've put my foot down.

"Now we're here, though, we'll have to go through with it, an' make some excuse to get away early. Yuh watch yore step, an' pass the word to Bow an' Tim that they're to go mighty easy on the redeye. That cussed boarder's lappin' it up by the quart already, an' I'll bet my saddle he'll be drunk as a boiled owl before the day's half over! Look at him, will yuh?"

It seemed a reasonably safe bet. The reserved, taciturn Mr. Robert Stanley appeared to have come out of his shell as a butterfly emerges from a cocoon. For a man who had required complete rest and quiet to build up his shattered health, he displayed an astonishing amount of energy—or bounce, as Hasty termed it scornfully.

He flirted with the bold-eyed, painted girls, and was chummy and confidential with the obese old men. His glass was constantly being emptied and replenished. His voice grew shrill and his laugh hilarious. Martha, from whom he kept away after the first introductions were over, looked at him now and then with a puzzled, hurt expression in her soft brown eyes. She hadn't known

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him long, but she had grown to like him very much indeed. . . .

But she did not lack for attention. Two or three beefy gentlemen vied with one another for her smiles. And a certain Miss Judith Hawley, a tall, statuesque beauty whose scarlet lips were made up in the shape of a heart, went out of her way to be agreeable—when she was not occupied with the subjugation of Gale Chandler.

Miss Hawley was absolutely thrilled at meeting a genuine two-gun man—the real thing! Not—with a negligent wave of an exquisitely manicured hand—one of the motion picture characters with which Mr. Stockridge had dressed up the ranch. Oh, they were colorful enough, especially that One-eyed Mose Ruidoso and his brother; but one couldn't take them seriously. Miss Hawley had heard a lot about Mr. Chandler, and been enormously interested in what she had heard. Still, she hadn't really wanted to meet him, because she was afraid of being disappointed. She wasn't, though; she was thrilled and excited, and she did want to know him better. How far off *was* the Upside-Down K Ranch?

All this was gotten across to Chandler principally by smiling implication, rather than in direct statements. Miss Judith Hawley was not crude in her methods. But Gale Chandler would have been a much duller person than he actually was, had it not been fairly clear to him that the young woman was doing her best to fascinate him. He was amused and intrigued, perhaps even a little flattered when she hinted, a bit broadly, that if he were to present himself at the ranch that evening after the party, he would find her disengaged. Oh, yes—the men were all right, but dull and too old. Did Mr. Chandler play the guitar, by any chance? She adored guitar music.

And yet, sophisticated and subtle though she was, Gale felt, somehow, doubtful of her sincerity. It might have been intuition, or it might have been the forked glance she cast at Anthony Morello when the latter was bending solicitously over Kit Kenniston. At any rate, something told Gale that she was neither thrilled at meeting him, nor cared a snap of her fingers whether or not she ever saw him again.

Why she should want him to think she did was a puzzle; why she should trouble to let him know that she was expecting him to return that evening interested him. It might be that she was trying to make Morello jealous, because Gale suspected that Miss Hawley found the handsome Latin neither too dull nor too old, nor yet a tiresome bore!

Meanwhile Gale had discovered that a lathy little man, with smooth, pink cheeks, scanty hair, and horn-rimmed spectacles, answered to the name of Edward Winter! This, somehow, put him in very good humor, so that he did not mind Miss Hawley's amusing herself with him, if she wanted to.

Edward Winter, the gay Lothario whose arm Kit had hugged right on the main street of Silver Forks, the dangerous Don Juan who "said it" with twenty-five dollars' worth of American Beauty roses sent from three hundred miles away, looked like a small, solemn schoolboy on a Sunday outing!

The funny-faced little skate seemed a decent sort, too, and he wasn't drinking a drop, which helped to take some of the curse off Stanley's behavior—blast the cuss for bringing that look to Martha's eyes! And, as Winter had announced that he was leaving for the East on the evening train to consult with his publishers and probably should not be able to return to the Long Bar Circle for several months, why, let him monopolize Kit for a few hours!

Gale was, as a matter of fact, thankful that Winter clung to the seat beside Kit like a barnacle, and refused to be dislodged by Morello, whose admiration for the girl had been evident from the moment that he was introduced to her. He was constantly strolling over to her to murmur as close to

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her ear as he could get, and once or twice brought a quick flush to her piquant face.

If Winter hadn't been there—but he was! And he stuck! By all means, let him fend off the obsequious Stockridge, the sleek, oily, ingratiating Morello and all the rest of the unsavory crew!

The impromptu events went off well enough, with Bull Stockridge as master of ceremonies and Tony Morello acting as his assistant. There was some good riding and roping, a fine horse race with a whirlwind finish, and an exhibition of knife-throwing, in which One-Eyed Mose Ruidoso outlined his own evil-faced brother, Monte, with a handful of assorted cutlery. Then there was unlimited liquor, laughter, and applause. To judge by the racket and the air of high festivity, everyone present was having a marvelous time.

But—Gale Chandler judged by neither. To him, the gaiety was artificial, and beneath the flow of fun ran a sinister undercurrent. Although he called himself a nervous old woman, his uneasiness persisted. He was uncomfortably conscious, all the while, of being on the alert against some unknown danger that threatened. It kept him taut as a fiddle string—this as yet unseen shadow of black wings hovering, about to swoop. Unbidden thoughts, darting into his mind, questions to which he could give no reassuring answer, nagged at him ceaselessly, annoying as the prickling of a burr.

What was behind Bull Stockridge's bluff pretense that bygones were bygones, and that he had none but the kindest feelings for the man who had knocked him down? Just where did Morello himself fit into the picture, and what was the idea of getting Kit and Martha over to a joint like the Long Bar Circle, anyway?

There was something here—some plot, deep and mysterious and quite elusive. Gale raged inwardly at his inability to get a clue to it, to put his finger on anything but tantalizing filaments that he could spin into no definite thread. He was certain of but two things; the "rodeo" had been gotten up with some definitely evil purpose, and the Long Bar Circle was no ordinary dude ranch.

For all its appearance of a successful dude ranch, it was nothing to Gale Chandler but a glorified honkytonk. Nor had Bull Stockridge's money paid for it, for the fellow had never raised an honest herd in his life. Who, then, had put up the actual dollars to inaugurate this ornate combination of gambling hell and dance hall?

Well, no matter about that part. If a few rich, overfed old fools chose to pay the reckoning, of what consequence was it whose pocket the cash ultimately came to line? All that concerned Gale now was getting the Kenniston girls away from the rowdy party, back to the clean, untainted air of the Upside-Down K. Neither of them would ever set foot on Long Bar Circle land again; and if any of the gentry present—meaning particularly Mr. Tony Morello—presumed to try to keep up an acquaintance, well, it could easily be made clear to him where he stood!

Gale bowed his excuses to Miss Judith Hawley and rose to his feet as Morello, accompanied by a red-haired, slouching, surly-mannered man in an embroidered buckskin vest, came up to him.

"You know Two-Spot Lorton, of course, Chandler. He's all set an' r'arin' to go. Your match will be the big event of the day!"

Lorton, known as an expert shot throughout Wedge County, grunted at Gale and shifted his bulky quid of tobacco to the other cheek.

"Big event, hell!" he growled. "I've told yuh I ain't in Chandler's class when it comes to unravelin' lead at that distance, Morello. He'll have a reg'lar walk-over, an' I'll look like a dirty deuce in a new deck afore all these folks."

"Oh, come now, Two-Spot, you're too

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modest!" Morello rallied him. "Chandler may have the reputation of being Big Casino with a sixgun around here, but I'm betting my money on you." He flashed his sleek smile at Gale. "I'm supporting the home team!"

"Oh, yeah?" mumbled Two-Spot. "Bettin' yore whole roll, are yuh? Well, then, yuh'll lose it, Morello. An' afterwards, yuh can't say I didn't warn yuh, neither. I'll match shots with ary hombre at fifty yards. But my eyesight ain't what it used to be, an' when yo're askin' me to nail that damn thing at a hundred an' fifty, an' make any sort of show against Gale Chandler here—"

He shrugged, spat, and turned to glower sullenly at the men who were setting up the target against a small knoll, a half-dozen or so feet away from the main barn. It was the sort of target known as a silhouette; that is, a white background, with the head and torso of a man painted on it in black. The arms were crooked out a little, and a narrow white line indicated the vital area of the body, an area in which a shot would be most likely to prove fatal to a man.

In a loud, commanding voice, Bull Stockridge was announcing the conditions of the match. Each of the two contestants was to fire five shots within the time of twenty seconds. A hit in the head or within the white line drawn on the body, scored ten points; any shot outside the prescribed limits was counted as a miss.

"That's accordin' to the rules," Bull shouted. "But, ladies an' gents, these here two fellers who're goin' to show yuh some shootin' as *is* shootin', has agreed to forget that that there silly-ette hombre has got any body a-tall. They're goin' to fire at the head only, an' try to put five winders apiece in it. Take yore choice an' make yore bets, ladies an' gents! Now, then, boys, get all set an' ready. Mr. Morello's doin' the timin', an' I'll give yuh the word. Yore turn first, Chandler."

That he had agreed to fire at a mark hardly six inches in diameter which, over the sights of his forty-five, would look no bigger than a half-dollar, was all news to Gale, and not good news either.

But it was out of the question now to decline to compete. If, as he suspected, the Upside-Down K party had been brought here with some sinister purpose, even the semblance of a disagreement or argument must be carefully avoided, lest it be used as the springboard to precipitate a general fight. He must raise no objections, and pretend to be satisfied with the arrangements which had been made without his knowledge or consent.

"Wonder they didn't set the damn thing up over in Spafford County," grumbled Bow Jackson, jealous for the prestige of his beloved foreman and the Upside-Down K. "They've fixed it so yuh'll lose to Two-Spot, an' that'll ballyhoo their cussed dude spread. Yuh was a chump to let 'em get away with it, Gale. Don't let it faze yuh, though. What this bunch don't know about real shootin' would fill a whole flock o' libraries, I wouldn't wonder!"

Gale had no intention of letting it faze him. But he expected to be beaten, and was prepared to allow Stockridge's outfit to get whatever it could out of the affair.

But he was more than a little perplexed by Lorton's attitude. Two-Spot was not acting. He was genuinely reluctant to compete, even though he couldn't possibly lose! Unless he shut both eyes and fired into the air, he was virtually certain to make a better showing than his adversary. As to his eyesight "not bein' what it used to be," that was pure hokum. If any man in the Southwest could hit that distant black spot which was the head of the silhouette, Two-Spot Lorton was his name!

"Oh, go in and win, Mr. Chandler!" Judith Hawley was whispering. "You can—I know you can. I've seen the prize. It's a tiny little gold concha, in the shape of a gun. I—I'd adore to

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have it as a souvenir. Won't you please win it for me?"

Not so subtle, this; but when a lovely lady uses all her blandishments on a simple-minded son of the West, surely she can take it for granted that she had fascinated him! A tiny golden gun for a souvenir, and the strains of a guitar by moonlight. . . .

"Won't you win it for me?" she repeated in the softest of voices.

"I'll try," said Gale, simply, as he drew his gun from its holster and stepped to the firing line. She was welcome to the gadget—if he won it; he wanted nothing from the Long Bar Circle.

"Ready!" bawled Stockridge. "Watch close, now, all you folks, 'cause yo're goin' to see somethin' worth seein'! Aim! *Fire!*"

Five times in rhythmic succession, Gale's forty-five spoke. And those among the crowd who were watching the target could see five circular holes in the silhouette's head—almost in the center of the head. The dainty little powder puff that Judith Hawley had taken from its jeweled case, if placed against them, would nearly have covered all of the five. The prestige of the Upside-Down K would not suffer much!

A murmur of admiration, a burst of applause went through the little crowd of onlookers as Gale lowered the muzzle of his gun. They had seen something worth seeing—something that none of them had ever seen before and might never see again, an exhibition of skill and accuracy that was almost miraculous.

"Seventeen seconds," called out Tony Morello, looking up from his stopwatch to peer through his glasses at the target. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have to announce that the score is one hundred per cent, perfect! Your turn, now, Lorton. It's up to you to do as well for your own outfit!"

Two-Spot Lorton mumbled profanely under his breath as he slouched to the firing line and squinted over his sights. His face was glum and sullen-looking, as he waited for the command.

Gale, reloading his empty weapon, paused to watch him in renewed perplexity. What under the sun was the matter with the man? He couldn't be nervous! Two-Spot didn't have a nerve in his body, and yet it was perfectly clear to Gale that he didn't want to shoot. Grudging, surly reluctance was written all over him, as if he had been forced into action against his will.

Ordinarily, he would have seized any opportunity of demonstrating his skill. He would have swaggered and bragged, and insisted on proving that he was the better man at that distance—which he was.

What had come over him, that he hung back and cursed under his breath? He was perfectly sober, perfectly capable of hitting that small distant mark.

Nevertheless, he missed it—twice. His first two shots pierced the body of the silhouette inches below the neck line!

CHAPTER VII

"Say It with Sixguns"

JUST then Robert Stanley, perched unsteadily on a bench in the forefront of the crowd, uttered a shrill burst of derisive laughter.

"Oh-ho-ho!" he crowed boisterously. "That'sh twenty off, to start! Hurray for the best shot in Wedge County! Hurray! Hurray! The old Upside-Down K winsh in a walk! Hurray!"

Two-Spot darted a malignant glance in his direction, thumbed the hammer of his gun swiftly three times—and put three bullets squarely into the middle of the head of the silhouette. And an even smaller powder puff than Miss Hawley's would wholly have covered their marks!

Morello pressed the lever of his stopwatch.

"Nineteen seconds. Score, thirty out of a possible fifty," he shouted. "Chandler wins—and congratulations to him!

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"Well, Miss Kit"—he leaned down to smile into Kit Kenniston's charming, flushed face—"your representative certainly has it all over our man when it comes to the shooting game. You know, I shouldn't enjoy having him camping on my trail; I'd much rather be on his side of the argument!"

Under cover of the general chorus of congratulatory shouts that had gone up at the announcement of his success, Gale turned to Two-Spot Lorton, his brows furrowed in a frown.

"Say, what in hell was the matter with yuh, Two-Spot?" he wanted to know. "Got yuh a touch of the sun today, or somethin'? Why, yuh can outshoot me at that range any day, an' perforate that head ten times out of every ten!"

"Aw, shut yore face, will yuh?" snarled Two-Spot, his own face gone fiery red, his eyes snapping with rage. "Didn't I tell yuh I wasn't in yore class?"

A hand fell on his arm, and he wheeled angrily to confront the boarder from the Upside-Down K, very uncertain as to gait, and quite blurred as to speech, but very genial and apologetic.

"Awf'lly shorry, Mister Two-Sphot," Robert Stanley said. "Couldn't be shorrier. No! Shouldn't have said what I did. Not sportsman—sportsman-like, not at all. I was jusht carried away by exchitement, understand? Shouldn't have called out an'—flur—flurried you. You—you're a good shot, Mister Two-Sphot, a mighty good shot. If you'd jusht had my gun, now—it's smaller'n yours, but it carries 'n' awf'lly powerful bullet—awf'lly accurate. 'S wonderful gun, Mister Two Sphot. Why, I b'lieve—I'm nothing but a dub at shootin', y'understand, but I believe I could hit that thing over there with it myshelf!"

He pulled out a thirty-eight, pointed it waveringly at the silhouette and pulled the trigger. The report, much sharper than that of a Colt forty-five, was followed by a splintering sound. It came from the direction of the barn, to which a silo was attached—the only one in Wedge County.

The Long Bar Circle kept milk cows in order that its guests might have plenty of fresh milk, and deemed a silo necessary to keep the dairy herd in good condition through the winter. It was this that Stanley's bullet had hit.

"Here! That won't do!" Gale expostulated, starting forward as Bull Stockridge reached over and grabbed the maudlin marksman by the wrist, twisting the barrel of the gun upward.

"You'll have to quit that pronto, young feller!" he said gruffly. "No offense—but I can't have yuh slingin' lead around when yuh don't know one end of a gun from the other." Then to Gale, "This gent's a-boardin' over at yore outfit, ain't he, Chandler? I thought he come with Miss Martha. Well, yuh best pack his bean-shooter home for him an' let him put holes in yore corral for practice!"

Stanley cocked a mournful eye at him.

"Now, isn't that a shame?" he grieved, looking as though he were about to cry, but making no resistance as Stockridge took the gun from his hand. "I'm so very shorry, Mr. Stockridge. I'm a regular dub, of coursh. Hope I didn't do any damage to your beautiful silo, giving my li'l' exhibition."

"None that a plug an' a dab o' paint won't mend, but yuh better let Chandler have yore toy," Stockridge returned and handed the weapon to Gale, who removed the remaining cartridges from the cylinder before returning it to its owner. They were long-nosed, full-jacketed affairs, and, the young foreman reflected, Stanley certainly hadn't over-stated it when he had declared that they were powerful. They must carry a mighty big powder charge, to go clear through two walls of the silo and come out the other side. It had done just this, for Gale had seen the bullet kick up the dust beyond, on the knoll.

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Well, now he had to get this pie-eyed lunatic corralled where he wouldn't start anything else. Not that Gale wouldn't cheerfully have left him with Stockridge, instead of having to take him back to the Upside-Down K. He belonged among a gang like this—leering old rounders and cheap painted women—and he wasn't fit for a fine, sweet girl like Marty to wipe her boots on! Escorting her to a party, and then getting silly drunk—neglecting her while he filled his fool hide with liquor and drilled a hole through Stockridge's silo—the braying jackass! Serve him right if Bull had bent the gun over his head!

Meditatively, Gale fingered again those long-nosed bullets that he had dropped into his pocket. Made a man wonder if Stanley knew anything at all about ammunition! Now, he'd have sworn that no bullet could go clear through that silo at a hundred and fifty yards—no, nor at a hundred. Some penetrative power, huh?

Gale's astonishment about that particular thirty-eight bullet was to increase later on. . . .

Judith Hawley was waiting for him, but he saw Martha beckoning, and he wormed his way through the noisy crowd to her side.

"I'm so glad you won, Gale," she said enthusiastically. "It was splendid shooting, and I'm proud of you. But won't you please look up Kit for me, and tell her I think we ought to be starting home as soon as your prize has been presented? It's getting late and —and you don't mind telling her, do you, Gale?"

It wasn't very late. They could remain another hour, and still have ample time to make the trip back home before supper. But Gale could guess why Martha was ready to leave, and he was glad that the suggestion had come from her. It relieved him of the necessity of making up some excuse. He nodded, signed to Hasty and Bow, and strode over to where Kit was sitting on a bench under a clump of cottonwoods, with Edward Winter alongside of her.

The little Easterner rose as he approached, and made him an elaborate bow.

"Champion, we salute you!" he intoned solemnly, and swept his sombrero nearly to the ground. "Victor of the greatest event of the greatest day, it would be but fitting that you be crowned with laurel. Lacking that, we've prepared a garland to adorn your noble brow. We offer you our homage, with this, our humble chaplet. Deign, O fair sir, to accept both."

With unbroken gravity, he held out a ridiculous object, woven of half a dozen twigs broken from a shrub, with the leaves sticking out at absurd angles, and a drooping white flower perched dejectedly in the center of the whole.

A number of people had turned and were craning their necks to see what was going on, as Gale, grinning good-naturedly at the joke, cast a sly, side-long glance at the giggling Kit and significantly tapped the butt of his Colt. He owed the youngster a couple, and this was a good chance to get even.

"I reckon I ought to feel mighty proud an' honored, sir," he drawled. "But I don't know how to act, honest I don't. I ain't used to bein' crowned, yuh see, an' I ain't rightly sure what to do. Out here, we don't say it with flowers, Mister Winter; we say it with six-guns!"

Kit Kenniston sprang to her feet, a scarlet flush of embarrassment mounting to the roots of her bright hair. If Gale mentioned that box of flowers, with Winter's card— Her hand went out appealingly.

"Gale! Stop! You musn't—"

Fingers caught at his sleeve, pulled him abruptly back from the bench and held to him tightly, pinioning his arm against his body. He found himself looking into Judith Hawley's excited face.

"Good heavens, man!" she cried shrilly. "You can't quarrel with Mr.

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Winter. He isn't armed! Let go of that gun!"

Kit shrieked something at him, but Gale did not hear it. A forty-five roared close at hand, and he staggered back, reeling against the trunk of the cottonwood behind him.

But, in the brief interval between Judith's clutch at him and the crashing report of the weapon, he had caught the glint of sunlight reflected from the dull metal of its barrel. Across his mind, like a lightning flash, had darted the thought that his forebodings had been only too well justified. He had been induced to come to the Long Bar Circle only that he might be murdered in cold blood!

(To be continued in the next issue)

Chuck Wagon Etiquette

THE chuck wagon is no dining salon, and while its main purpose in life is to fill up cowboy emptiness in the digestive regions, yet on the range it is entitled to rate as an institution, rather than as a mere adjunct to the cow business. And as an institution, it has its etiquette or rules of conduct, varying some, of course, with the personality of the cook.

To begin with, the *cocinero* (cook), often called the "coosie," is the absolute lord of his little domain of the wagon—except, of course that the wagon boss or round-up foreman outranks all his men, cook included, in authority. But even the wagon boss must respect cook's rules of etiquette if he wants to keep a cook.

To begin with, the cook need not have his slumber disturbed by worry over waking up at the right time in the morning—early enough to have breakfast by around five or five-thirty o'clock. He rates a call. The last night guard, when a herd is being held, must wake the cook. If there is no guard this responsibility is still up to some one of the hands.

"Coosie" must not be expected to "rustle his wood" unaided. The horse wrangler should help him. If the wrangler doesn't, then punchers must pitch in at the job; and he is entitled to as good fuel as the locality can provide.

As the wagon hauls the cowboys' beds, it is an unpardonable sin for a puncher to leave camp of a morning without first carefully rolling up his bed for the day's trip.

Gunfights have grown out of some careless puncher riding near enough to the wagon to raise dust that will blow or drift into the "kitchen," for, believe it or not, most *cocineros* believe in serving their grub clean.

Without coosie's permission no cowboy has any business lying in the shade of the wagon. That's the cook's private quarters, if he desires so to use it. Some ill-tempered cooks will throw dishwater (yes, they do wash their dishes) under the wagon to keep punchers out. If a puncher happens to be there at the time, that's just his hard luck.

Plenty of "hurrahing" with the cook is always in order, so long as it is good-natured and so received; but no wagon boss will permit any hand to quarrel or row with the *cocinero*.

Cattle and the saddle *remuda* must be kept out of the nearest available water so as not to muddy it up. Punchers must keep their hands away from the chuck until the cook says it's ready—which he is likely to do with some pet phrase, probably a little "poem" with a tune to it, like this old breakfast call:

"Bacon in the pan,
Coffee in the pot—
Git up an' take it, boys,
While it's still hot!"

It's easy to see why the cook can be a tyrant; all the food is in his charge and possession, and cowboys have to eat. But let it be said, too, that most rangeland coosies have always taken pride in "feedin' 'em good." Nor are all rules in the cook's favor. Riders in late are entitled to hot coffee and warmed-up food, and many a cook has kept the coffee pot hot and well filled at all times, with every puncher welcome to help himself.

At night, around the campfire, it is practically an unwritten law that a song or a fiddle piece or a story be not broken into—unless, of course, the talk is a general discussion.

Most chuck wagon coosies don't stir the beans with their sixguns, but most of 'em are fairly prompt to stir up cowboys with one if they don't observe the plain, simple rules of chuck wagon etiquette.

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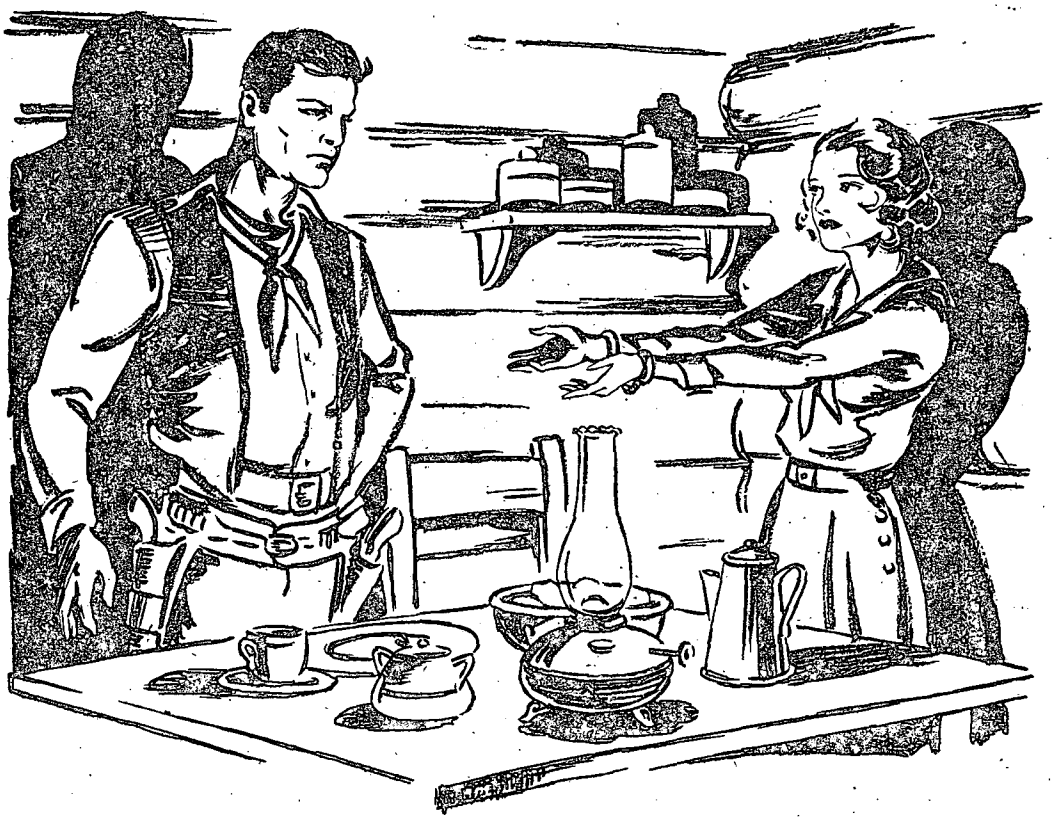

Wind of Destiny

By Tracy Spitler

The wind howled and screeched outside the old log house, while within Brook faced a slender, sweet-faced girl and wondered. Wondered if love or treachery had come to him, if he dared let himself answer the call that echoed in his heart.

THOUGH but an hour past a May sundown, a gray half-light was already thickening to an uneasy dark, and the wind was whining and whimpering like a litter of abandoned wolf whelps in the gulches.

Brook paid it little heed. Wearily he rubbed down the old cow-pony that had carried him forty miles since morning and fed it oats in the half-ruined horse barn. Then he made his slow way to the dark house.

His high-heeled boots thumped hollowly over the stoop and across the uneven floor of the kitchen. The wind slapped the door closed behind him viciously. It howled down the chimney and banged the sitting-room shutters. Without pause it continued to rise in wrath.

At last it caught his attention. Listening, his young face bleak, he muttered, "Whoop 'er up! Blow down the damn nesters' shacks. Play hell with their crops, if any. Any time they're homesteaders, I'm a buzzard. Just dummies infestin' the range, worse'n the sheep that're pourin' in! But prove they're dummies, that's what I've got to do. Likewise prove I'm not a double-crossin' son-of-a-gun and a red-handed killer to boot."

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The dying light trembled briefly on a deputy sheriff's star pinned to his work shirt. He fingered it bitterly. The long clean line of his jaw hardened, his far-seeing gray eyes smoldered with baffled fury. Then he swung his head like a tormented bull and moved toward a shelf that was covered with scalloped newspaper and on which sat a lamp. It was a squat glass lamp with bright red yarn floating in its kerosene-filled bowl.

Briefly and tenderly his eyes warmed. His mother always used to put yarn in the lamps, here in this old log house, and she had always lined the open shelves with scalloped newspapers. Fixing things her way seemed to bring her back now, seemed to lessen the loneliness of this down-at-the-heels ranch in the Seven Mile country.

He made a light and built a fire in the cookstove. He'll boil about a gallon of strong coffee and brace up. But the teakettle was dry and the water pails were empty. Well, if this gale hadn't taken the springhouse—

What was that? Brook flung up his head like a startled horse. It sounded like a scream. There it went again, fearful, frantic. A girl might scream so, gripped by stark terror, or tossed and twisted by this torturing wind.

An instant and Brook was out on the kitchen stoop. Pitch dark now! His eyes were of little use. Cupping his hands about his mouth, he gave voice to that shrill *yipee* which moves lagging cow brutes and startles wild horse herds. The wind tore the cry from him, distorting it eerily. But another far-off scream echoed it.

Following the sound as best he might, lashed by the gale, staggering against it, alternatingly calling and listening, he made his way to the old hay barn which stood a few hundred feet down a rutted lane, across from his house.

And there, against the barn's weathered east wall, limp and spent but upright, held so by the strength of the wind, stood a slight figure. A woman, to judge by the soft light blur of her dress. A young one, to judge by the supple yielding of her body.

Then he gathered her into his arms much as he'd pick up a young calf lagging behind a trail herd. While he fought their desperate way back to the shelter of his house in silence, Brook's inward turmoil was as wild as the night.

He couldn't see her face, he'd never spoken to her in his life, he didn't even know her name. But here she was in his arms. There could be no mistake. His arms recognized her. His heart loved her. Every fiber of his being was shoutingly aware of her—Fuller's girl.

She must have a name of her own, but everyone in the Seven Mile called her merely and contemptuously Fuller's girl, or, that kid niece of Jackson's.

Well? For one high moment beneath the hidden stars, with raging elements threatening their very lives, Brook knew an exaltation, a freedom of spirit which lifted him to perilous heights. Nothing counted except that he was a man, pitting his strength and wits against the furies of loosed hell, with a clutching, frightened girl in his arms. Fuller's girl! That kid niece of Jackson's!

A bitter, silent laugh shook him. Somewhere in this layout was a huge joke. But who was the butt of it? Jackson's niece, here in the enemy's arms? Jackson, a week in his grave? Or Brook himself, momentarily expecting arrest for the killing of Jackson?

They reached the house. The wind had blown out the lamp's flame; except for the glow from the cookstove's open front, the kitchen was in darkness. Brook muttered thickly as he forced the outer door closed and placed the girl upon her feet. "Mind your shins. Lots of boxes and such sorta loose round here. I'll make a light."

The lamp chimney was smoked, the light was dim and of little avail against the shadows which filled the low-ceilinged, roomy kitchen and wrapped the girl in their obscurity. She remained silent except for her gasping breathing.

Brook's gaze slid over her swiftly. There was something stiff and strange

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in the way she held her arms as she stood turned slightly from him. There was much that was torturingly familiar in her slender height and the slow, proud lift of her blond head. But of thanks, of explanation, there was no sign.

Brook cursed softly beneath his breath. Was she pretending to be a tumbleweed or something, blown to his home place without her volition? Did she expect him also to pretend that? What sort of game was this? What sort of trap?

He seized a pail from the bench near the stove and headed for the door. Over his shoulder he said, "Sit down, ma'am, whilst I rustle some water. We'll have chow in no time."

If she replied he did not hear her. Certainly, when he returned from the springhouse to find her slumped in a chair where the shadows were thickest, she made no attempt at conversation.

Brook thought, this is a hell of a note! Maybe she won't speak because she hasn't been introduced. Maybe she'd fainted. "Here!" He brought a brimming dipper to her. "Get outside some cold water while the kettle's boilin'."

She murmured thanks and lifted her lips.

Brook held the dipper and she drank thirstily. Liked to be waited on, didn't she? Maybe her arms were broken. Maybe her hands held a gun there, hidden in the folds of her shirt. . . . Dammit, he wished he could see her face clearly! But her soft, fair hair, disordered by the wind, was a veil. She made no attempt to tidy it; she still offered no word of explanation.

Didn't think him worth the effort, huh? Brook's gorge rose. What'n time had he ever come back to the Seven Mile for? No one—the Bar 3, the nesters, the sheriff—gave a damn for him. So why hadn't he stayed in Cheyenne? There he could have starved peacefully without the risk of running his head into a noose.

Abruptly he busied himself at the stove and table, pretending indifference. But he was burning with curiosity, tingling with awareness. It made him awkward. He broke things and knocked over chairs. The girl giggled faintly.

Brook slammed dishes of food on the table and went to fetch a clean lamp from the sitting room. He hoped its clearer flame would throw light on this situation. At length he said, "Come and get it!" and seated himself, boorishly, he uncomfortably knew.

The girl came haltingly across the uneven floor and leaned against the table's edge. Her hands still lost in the folds of her dress. She swept her wind-tangled hair from her face by a quick toss of her head. "My horse threw me," she offered conversationally.

Brook sharply drew in his breath. She was prettier than he remembered, this girl of Fuller's, and sweet. He jeered, "Yeah? Well, the beast showed sense. But maybe you thought this was a swell evenin' for a ride, huh, tenderfoot?"

"You hate me, don't you, mister?" she asked softly. "That first day in Seven Mile, a month ago, when I was coming out of the post office and ran right smack into you and you had to hold on to me to keep us both from going down, you began to hate me, didn't you? I felt it, kinda."

"So you slanted right out to Jackson's claim shack," Brook drawled ironically, "and cried yourself to sleep, huh? Couldn't"—God, why did he want to hurt her, to choke her and fling her from him?—"Fuller console you?"

She flinched like a quirted horse. The sight enraged Brook. He blazed at her, "What difference does it make how I feel about you, if I feel at all? I . . . just . . . don't . . . know you, ma'am. Get that?"

He thumped the table to drive home the point. "When I lit back in these parts a little over a month ago, I didn't know you were on earth. I didn't put myself in your way that day in Seven Mile. You'd just been pointed out to me as the sweetheart of that slimy toad Fuller, who calls himself a horse doctor, and—"

"And knowing Fuller"—the girl cut

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in; "but *did* you know Fuller, mister?"

Brook shook his head, grinning unpleasantly. He wanted to whoop, for now he was getting the light he'd hoped for. Fuller and his crowd must be uneasy. They weren't so sure they had him pegged. They must be craving to learn just how much he knew, what he suspected. And this was how they were going about it. Slick! Older, shrewder men than he could easily be expected to walk into the trap this sweet piece baited. Well, he'd do his level best to out-smart the trap.

Truthfully he could say he did not know Fuller; the man had gone by another name a few years before in Utah. He had been a cattle buyer in those days, known to Brook only by sight and reputation, as smooth a rascal as ever remained out of jail. Slight, dark and dapper, noisy as to clothes, oily as to tongue, he gave off an air of falseness that warned of danger as unmistakably as did a stallion's scream.

That was Fuller. And this tall, fair girl, as slim and silvery as a young aspen tree, was Fuller's!

The wind had found a place in the old log walls where the chinking was loose. It whistled through shrilly, striking Brook at the base of the skull—and at the core of his heart. The lamp's flame leaped. The girl, sighing, repeated her question.

"No," Brook growled, "I didn't know *Fuller*. Sit down, can't you, and eat somethin' before it's stone cold. While it's sure as hell an ill wind that blew you here, now that you are here you might as well be comfortable, because—" He bit off the sentence and stared at her.

She met his look levelly. Queer that a girl of Fuller's and a kinswoman of that whining, no-account Jackson should have a look that was fearless without being bold, knowing without being sly. "Because?" she prompted.

He drawled, "You might find it harder to leave here, sweetheart, than it was to get here."

Briefly she winced and seemed to grow small. Then her chin lifted slowly, her huskily soft voice carried conviction. "You're wrong, mister. You see, you've got to forget I'm . . . Fuller's girl, as folks call me. You've got to forget you're trying to be a tough hombre. Instead you must remember you're the law. You've got to *sabe* that I'm just something for you to put in jail."

Brook gave her his bitter grin. "Forefootin' me, huh? You're smooth, lady, but don't crowd your luck. Say, I'm sure enough hungry now. Let's let the talk rest whilst we eat."

"Suits me, mister. But do you think it's"—a little laugh caught in her throat—"safe to take these hobbles off me?" She lifted her arms. The lamplight gleamed on steel around her wrists. She added, "The sheriff put 'em on. Reckon you've got a key that'll fit?"

Brook brought one high boot heel down on the toe of his other foot. And felt the pressure painfully. So he was awake then! And she—

Smiling at him, by the Lord Harry! The way his mother used to smile when he'd done some tomfool thing which might've hurt them all but somehow seldom did.

"I sure like this house." The girl rubbed her freed wrists and let her glance rove over the kitchen. "I used to ride past, before you got back, wishing I lived here. I love those old lamps with the yarn in them. They're sweet. But your cookstove could sure use some polish. And the chairs and cupboard should be painted white—no, pale green maybe, 'cause there must be lots of sunlight in this room. Three west windows, three south. You ought to have red geraniums—"

"Listen, ma'am—"

"My name's Lynn Tapping and I wish you wouldn't look at me like I was a coyote with rabies. I'm plumb harmless, mister."

"Yeah? Reckon that's why the sheriff handcuffed you!"

Her eyes were merry in the leaping lamplight, her voice softened the whine of the wind as she said, "Skeptical, aren't

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you? It's wrong to be like that, mister. It ages you. I know for a fact you're only twenty-seven, but—"

"Now, how in time—"

She twinkled, "I saw it in the tea leaves—and a whole lot more! You see, I never did hate you, mister, because you're practically the only man in the Seven Mile," her face grew bleak, her eyes suddenly wintry, "who hasn't tried to make passes at me. Others despised me, same as you do, though that didn't stop 'em. But you're different. You're honest. And that day, coming out of the post office—"

"Rein up!" Brook broke in. "Was that a plant, too, like this? Let's have a look at the layout! I come back here because I've lost the job I've had in town for four years, and I'm broke. All I've got's this God-forsaken ranch and the remains of a scrub herd my folks died trying to make a livin' out of.

"I know," he pushed his coffee cup aside and leaned his elbows on the table, "it's a do-or-die proposition before I start. When I see the lay of the land I *sabe* it's worse than that. Homesteaders underfoot, the range sheep-infested and the two remaining big cow outfits armed to the teeth but not knowing what the score was.

"Don't try to stop me, Miss Lynn Tapping, even if you know the story backward. I don't. Talking it out might fill the gaps. The Bar 3 claims there's something rotten in this rush of settlers, but provin' it's a horse of a different color.

"They proposition me. Small fry that I am, I'm not the poison a nester is to 'em. So they dicker. They'll give me grazin' privileges on Bar 3 range if I throw in with them—under cover. Well, why not? I've no range of my own, and buildin' up a herd's my only play. I'm no dirt farmer. So I get in line."

He grinned unpleasantly at Lynn. "Gettin' an earful? Think you can remember it all? Be sure to tell Fuller that it was the Bar 3 that put pressure on the old sheriff and got me made a deputy, so's any of my li'l' killin's, if it comes to killin', will be legal. Then they turn me loose. 'Circulate,' says the Bar 3. 'Get friendly with these range-pollutin' hunyaks. Find out howcome they went back to the land. And if in the course of acquirin' evidence of fraud you find it necessary to down a few of 'em, that'll throw the fear of God into the rest, and we'll have elbow room again.'"

Brook shoved his chair from the table and began to pace the floor. Gone now was caution, there remained only the urgent need to present his side to a fellow human. "Well, ma'am, I thought I was slick, so far as method went, though I didn't like the layout at all. I didn't need to pretend to be the hardest-workin' hombre in the Seven Mile. I just naturally was, what with patchin' up these old buildings, mendin' fence and hazin' off the damned sheep that *happened* to be usin' my land for range. But I made time to be neighborly with the newcomers, learnin' their life stories some and comparin' 'em with mine.

"I draw blank so far's gettin' evidence that they're dummies is concerned, but I'm struck by the fact that most of these back-to-the-landers are from Utah. Likewise another thing that hit me between the eyes is the fact that Fuller is mighty interested in the nesters I call on. Drummin' up trade as a horse doctor, he explains, claimin' that the stringency of the times makes him have to scratch."

Brook slanted a questioning look at Lynn. Her bright head was bent above her chafed wrists. Huh, she should hang her head! But gosh, she needn't look so—so beaten and done for.

He went on doggedly. "Fuller might've been tellin' the truth. But it was damn queer that, after a call from him, three of these nester families left the country. And, much to Fuller's apparent chagrin, sheep take their place. Utah sheep, mind you!

"Another queer thing happened. Though he made Jackson's his headquarters while in the Seven Mile, and

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they're thick as thieves, one day, whilst snoopin' up Gun Barrel Gulch, I darn near rode down Jackson and Fuller, goin' round and round. At first I thought they were fightin' about you, ma'am. I thought even a spineless worm like Jackson'd have guts enough to make Fuller marry you, but—"

"Mister," Lynn's voice was insistent, "rein up! My uncle, Pete Jackson, would've killed me before he'd let Fuller have me. He'd've cut out Fuller's heart if that toad'd ever touched me. And Fuller knew it, knew it was the one thing old Pete would stand firm on. But, short of cutting out his tongue, Fuller couldn't be checked from making insinuations. His looks and his laughs were just plain damning, as were the things he didn't say, if you *sabe*. It was his way of warning off other fellows. He was afraid that if I fell in love with some hombre, I might—" She paused. Her eyes refused to meet Brook's.

"You're askin' me to believe that?" he jeered. "Tellin' me that it was all gossip?"

"Sticks and stones—" Lynn shrugged slim shoulders, her chin lifted sturdily—"can break my bones, but names can never hurt me, or something like that. What's it matter what folks here think, so long as I know I'm straight?

"If I could help poor old Uncle Pete—he's been father and mother to me since I was a little tyke—by taking care of his house and clothes for him, even though Fuller was practically always underfoot, why not do it? I give you my word, I didn't know there was anything crooked going on till it was too late to turn back. Of course, I could have got clear! I never would file on a claim in spite of Fuller's promises and threats, but I wouldn't walk out on old Pete. Tell me, what were they fighting about in Gun Barrel Gulch?"

Brook grinned at her hatefully over the cigarette he was rolling one-handed. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Lynn ignored his answer and pushed back her chair. She began to stack the soiled dishes, looking critically at the knives and forks. "T'sk, t'sk, it's a crying-out shame! Got any soda and a flock of clean dish towels? I'd like to give this stuff a treat!"

Brook circled the table and stood glowering at her. "Look here!" His hands gripped her shoulders, fury melted to a sort of madness. This girl in his mother's kitchen! Brightening it, pervading it as effortlessly as did the mellow lamplight, belonging to it. . . .

His head lowered until his eyes were on a level with hers. Slowly he drew her close and closer. The wind rose anew, howling like a legion of demons, banging the shutters, shaking the house. From somewhere across the dooryard came a splintering crash. The springhouse going? The rig shed? What of it! Fuller's girl in his arms, making free with his mother's kitchen, making a fool of him! "Why'd you come here?" he muttered. "What do you hope to gain?"

"Easy, mister!" Lynn's hand spread-fingered against his mouth. She pushed upward and outward with all her strength. "I'd sure like," she said, her breathing was unsteady but her gaze was level, "to have you kiss me—but not mean-like. Not now! It's mighty nice, feeling your arms about me, like that day in Seven Mile, but you must let me go. Please! When you look at me so, you make me feel like I'm the trash you think I am. Won't you please let loose of me, mister?"

Brook's arms fell to his sides. His laugh was bitter. "Lady, when you were prospectin' round for a sap, you sure picked the right man in me. I shine there! So now what?"

She tilted her bright head, listening. "There won't be a bit of glass left in your windows, if you don't fasten the shutters. And bolt the doors, too! Not a chance in a thousand anyone'd look for me here, but Jackson's claim is only five miles away and—" A speculative frown worried her brow, then she turned to the table, saying, "Anyway, I'll clear up this mess."

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A scalded pile of dishes was draining when Brook returned to the kitchen. Lynn was scouring frying-pans. "Reckon," she sent him a brief look over her shoulder, "you feel like telling me now what Uncle Pete and Fuller were talking about up Gun Barrel?"

Brook stubbornly shook his head.

"Was it anything about forgery?" the girl persisted. "Or the danger of Federal prison?"

"Suppose it was?"

"That's what they were always rowing about. They both knew they ran the risk of that. But Fuller doesn't care. He bragged that he had everything under control. You see, old Pete slipped up on some checks in Provo. Fuller got him clear somehow, and saved him up against the time when he, I mean Fuller, would need a sap to do some dirty work for him."

Lynn hung the frying-pans on nails behind the stove and dried her hands. "I'm beginning to see what put you on to old Pete, why you slanted up in a sweat to our claim shack the day before he—died.

"I was looking out the window. You didn't see me. Or you pretended not to! You and my uncle walked away from the shack. I couldn't hear a word you were saying, but I kept watching. One of my weaknesses when you're around, mister." She slanted him a shy smile. "Asking folks questions about you was another. I was having myself a grand time that day, noticing how swell you looked in your new range hat, how slick and clean your overalls were, how shiny your deputy's star was, how your cartridge belt sagged with the weight of your sixgun, careless-like.

"Too careless, mister! Because, when you leaned against the barn wall near the open door, I guess you didn't feel your own gun being slipped out of your holster and another being put in. Reckon you and old Pete hadn't a notion that Fuller was in the barn, listening and watching. Reckon he sort of had a hunch old Pete's fright was driving him to desperation and he was about to spill the beans. That was what he was on the point of doing, wasn't it?"

Brook nodded. "But the poor ol' galoot got stuck on the point, so to speak. He froze up on me, then reconsidered and promised to meet me here next day. Remember? He followed me to the gate and yelled at me. Those two clerks, or whatever they are, who've filed on that benchland above Jackson's claim, were driftin' in just then. Came to mooch dinner, they said. Turned out to be mighty handy witnesses at the inquest —though not for me. But what you tell me about the gun-changin', if you're tellin' the truth—"

Wind-rent silence filled the old kitchen for a space. Brook seated himself at the table, held his aching head with two balled fists. He'd give a year of his life, he thought, if he could believe in this girl's integrity. Clever, that handcuff stunt! But what did it signify if it weren't just a stunt? That's what all of this was, a stunt, a trick, as he'd first thought. She'd slip away somehow, when she'd pumped him dry, and give her information to Fuller. Or she'd stay until Fuller and possibly the sheriff fought their way through the storm!

He turned haggard eyes toward her, and said, "I'm past guessin' what your motive in comin' here can be, ma'am, but if it's revenge, get your fill! I'm done. Yesterday the Bar 3 owners sent for me. They've withdrawn their backin'. They've kicked my stuff off their range. I've ridden from hell to breakfast all this day, tryin' to find grazin' for my li'l' herd.

"The Bar 3, mind you, don't regret your uncle's passin'. What gripes 'em is the fact that his killin' was so public-like, so easily tied up with their hired gunfighter. Which fact they fear'll come out at the trial, if I have to stand trial. Why hadn't I ribbed up an alibi, they wanted to know. Why didn't I get air-tight evidence of fraud before I shot? For evidence is what the people of the Seven Mile country are out to get. The bullets taken from Jackson's body are being sent to a ballistic expert. So's

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my gun. I gave that up willin'ly enough, figurin' it was my one proof of innocence. But if what you say is true—"

"Mister," Lynn came swiftly to his side, her strong, small fingers bit into the muscles of his arm, "it is true, it is! That's why I'm here. Oh, listen to me! Believe me!" Her voice rose, shot shrilly through the wind's increasing roar.

"I'm nearly crazy myself. Keep thinking maybe I could have saved old Pete. But it never occurred to me he was in such real danger. That day, after he'd swapped guns, Fuller sneaked away. Just poked his head in at the door and said he had to meet one of his partners in town. I was so flustered, having to set extra places for those fellows from the bench, and so mad at you for pretending I wasn't on earth, that I didn't pay much heed to Fuller."

She tossed her tumbling hair back from her eyes. One small fist pounded Brook's shoulder. "Listen! I'm admitting I was dumb. I believed Fuller because I know he has two partners in this land-grabbing scheme. They're after thousands of acres for a great sheep range. While they've showed up here from time to time, the two other men generally stay in Utah, roping in folks who're broke and desperate, willing to file homestead claims, and then after a while relinquish them to interested parties. It's been going on for three years or more that I know of—"

"An old racket," Brook mumbled. "It's been worked since away back."

"But not on so large a scale before, I bet, not by such slick, dangerous men. And everything was rosy for 'em till you lit, mister. The big cattle outfits were lined up for trouble, of course, but Fuller had 'em spotted. You were something else again. You didn't square up with anything. Not important enough to rank with the big boys, not in the nester class. When you began to get pally with them, you sure tipped your hand to Fuller. Which put you on the spot."

"Ha, you're tellin' me?"

"Will you kindly shut up and listen? Where were you the day my uncle was killed? At the inquest, you claimed a rancher from over Graymont way phoned you, saying there was a saddle bum hanging round his bunkhouse whose description tallied with that of a suspect in the Graymont bank robbery. But you never reached that spread, and the rancher, Collins, swore at the inquest he'd never phoned for you at all. I know for a fact he didn't phone, and I know what prevented your showing up there, anyway.

"One of Fuller's partners prevented you. I just found out. Yesterday that hombre—his name's Stevens and he's been making himself inconspicuous in these parts for the past three weeks—came slanting out to Jackson's claim, looped to the gills, boasting about how smart he was, how, but for him, Fuller couldn't have pulled off any of this. So why didn't I—"

Lynn tossed her head impatiently, continued, "That part doesn't matter! Just what he said concerning the trick he played on you matters. Listen! The day you were to meet Uncle Pete here, the day he was killed, this Stevens, after putting in that fake Graymont call, trailed you.

"Remember meeting a tough and tipsy stranger on horseback a little north of Lazy Forks? Didn't he start to kid you about your tin star? Didn't he dare you to take off your gun and try to knock him out with your fists? Didn't he knock you cold when you accepted the challenge, and then fade away? I can see I've got it straight! Well, then, why didn't you tell all that at the inquest?"

Brook countered bitterly, "Who'd've believed me? I sure played the fool, lettin' that gent get me hostile. There were no witnesses except a few range cows to back me up. Thinkin' it over, I hardly believed myself that it happened.

"And I didn't go on to Graymont, because, when I came to after the sluggin', it was pretty late. Jackson, and not a possible bank robber, was what I'd

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been hired to get the goods on, so I fanned back to meet Jackson—"

"Who was dead in your dooryard," Lynn finished for him, "and not a living soul on the ranch, besides yourself, to say you weren't the killer. What did you do then? Phone the sheriff in Seven Mile?"

Brook nodded. He lived again the confusion of that evening. In retrospect it grew yet more confused. There had been a long wait and then had come some people from Seven Mile—the sheriff and a few hastily gathered possemen, Fuller among them. Had Fuller managed to switch guns on him again then?

There had followed questions, suspicions, activity. Straw in a wagon bed for Jackson's remains. A borrowed team for the grim journey. A warning to be present at the inquest the following day. The old sheriff had balked at making an arrest, largely, Brook supposed, because Fuller had clamored too loudly for it. The sheriff had his mulish moments; he had also the powerful Bar 3's influence to consider.

Hope stirred in Brook now. Here was a witness for him if the ballistic expert's report went against him and he was charged with murder. But would she be? "Why," he asked, "didn't you give all this in your testimony at the inquest? And why, knowin' all you say you know, are you stickin' on Jackson's claim with Fuller runnin' in and out?"

"I've stayed because I'd no place else to go, mister, and Fuller's running out now. Persuaded by a shot gun! Not that I had to shoot, *sabe?* He can take a hint, it seems. And I didn't testify fully at the inquest because I dared not. Fuller had me bluffed on that. As for saying anything about the gun-switching, it would have been only my word against his. I'm not yet sure in my own mind that Uncle Pete's killer was Fuller. That hombre has a swell alibi! And remember, I didn't know Stevens' part till yesterday."

"H'm," Brook muttered, "maybe so!" He went on impatiently, "But you are the beatin'est! One minute I sense truth in what you say, the next I'm sure you're lyin' like hell. For instance, if you're so scared of Fuller, why're you tellin' me all this now? And what's the sheriff got to do with it, anyway? Why'd he handcuff you?"

"Just as a bit of horseplay, or so he thought. *Oh!*" Lynn screamed as the house shook under the impact of a heavy weight hurled against it.

Brook's lips twisted. "Some breeze!" he said. "Likely lifted the horse barn roof and smashed it against the wall here. Maybe the house'll go next." He swiftly calculated their chances of survival and could see only the faintest.

"What shall we do about it?" Lynn asked hoarsely.

"Nothin' but wait, I reckon. These old log walls're pretty stout. We'd best stay right here. It's practically certain death outside. Are you afraid of death, ma'am?"

She stared at him with wide-open, child-like eyes. She asked, "Is it as bad as all that? Even in here?"

Quietly, with the calm of those who face doom courageously, Brook covered her hands with his. His head bent to hers so that his voice could be heard above the wind's mad clamor. "I don't want to spook you, but—"

"All right, mister!" Her head lifted with a quick, defiant toss. "If it's the end—well, it's got to come some time. I'm not afraid—much."

Brook's smile was tiredly tender, his arms were gently strong. "Poor little kid," he murmured.

She relaxed against him briefly, then she drew back and squarely faced him. "I don't know how you feel about things. But if this is the end, I don't want you thinking what I've told you is a yarn." She considered the possibility with darkening eyes. She sighed, "Well, I've always tried to do what I thought was right. And, mister, I've never lied to you. Will you believe that—now?"

The shadow of doom, the dignity and finality of imminent death lifted them

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briefly to a plane far removed from bitterness and deceit, from violence and passion. "I guess," Brook acknowledged slowly, "I couldn't doubt you if I wanted to—now. And I guess I must've loved you at sight. That's what made me hate you so."

To neither of them did that paradoxical statement seem ridiculous. "But I still don't *sabe*, Lynn," he went on, "why you were handcuffed when I found you."

The old shelf clock began to strike eleven, but was stopped on the stroke of nine by a lurch of the house. Man and girl exchanged a significant, fatalistic look.

Lynn giggled, faintly hysterical. "It won't be long now! So I'd best get this off my chest, since you crave to know. Where was I? Oh, yes, I was telling you about Stevens. Yesterday he made his boast. It took me till this morning to piece it all together, to realize how absolutely you were being ruined, killed.

"I tell you, mister, I was wild! What should I do? Who'd believe my unsupported word? What would happen to me if I told all I knew about Fuller's racket?

"I fought myself till I was nearly locoed. Then I lit out for Seven Mile. I was looking for the sheriff, but met Fuller first. Well, he just plain blew up when he found out where I was going. He gave me my choice of being shot dead on the spot, or married. He acted like a maniac.

"And then did things begin to happen! Stevens drifted out of the hotel, and the sheriff ambled up. Fuller, grinning like a death's-head, said we were getting married *pronto*. The sheriff seemed to think it was a plenty good idea. And about time. The silly old goat spread the word, all in a sweat to help, you know.

"The news spread like grass fire. First thing I knew, half the town was in the street. I was simply struck dumb. I can't tell you what weird notion made Fuller declare that the only place for the ceremony was Jackson's claim shack, unless it was the man's ghastly sense of humor.

"Anyway, the crowd was all for it. First thing I knew, a whole herd of people was headed for old Pete's claim, with eats, drinks, and all the makings of a big night! No one paid any attention to me. It was Fuller's show. And how he strutted his stuff! Even Stevens got into line. I just didn't know what to do.

"When we got to the claim, we found there wasn't room in the shack for all the folks. So they started to clear out the barn loft. I thought maybe I could get away in the confusion. But so did Fuller! So he got the sheriff to handcuff me. Because, he said, it suited me to pretend that I was reluctant, that I was shy. You know how crowds like Seven Mile folks love horseplay? Well, you can imagine how they ate up that handcuffing!

"Then the drinks began to circulate while they were waiting for the preacher, who hadn't got there yet. All the while I was praying for a break. It wasn't so long before it came. And this wind with it. I slipped out of the barn, climbed up on someone's tired old nag, which threw me when a tree crashed in the trail yonder—and here I am. I *had* to tell you what I knew, mister, and I figured this was my only chance. And I thought I'd be safe from Fuller if you put me in jail—as an accessory or witness or something. But now, of course, it doesn't matter!"

Her voice faded to silence. A strange, quiet peace pervaded the kitchen, making it a brief haven in the hurricane's heart. Trail's end, Brook thought, with his fight unfinished, his love unfulfilled. . . .

Lynn had sunk into the old cane-backed rocking-chair where his mother used to sit to knit beside the stove. She sent him a patient, gallant smile. Then her eyes closed; her head sagged. Game kid! Maybe going out this way was the best break she'd ever got. Maybe—

Moments, hours dragged by. Brook's

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head came up with a jerk. Waves of silence beat against his ears. The lamp burned low. Lynn was quiet in the rocking-chair, sleeping. But a moment before there had been something —there it went again! A clamor at the door! A voice! The sheriff? Fuller?

"Brook, Brook!" he recognized the voice of one of the homesteaders on the bench above Jackson's claim. "Open up if you're alive, man! Open!"

An instant while Brook shot the bolt, then the homesteader fluttered in a panic on the threshold. "We've got to have help!" he cried. "They're dyin'. There's a whole mess of people dyin' on Jackson's claim. The wind tore the barn to pieces. Fuller's plumb gone. There's a feller named Stevens about to cash in. He's screechin' somethin' about Fuller havin' framed you in Jackson's death. Hombre, is your phone workin'? We gotta have doctors. We gotta bring the injured here. . . ."

Lynn was on her feet in a fever of activity. "I'll try to phone. I'll build up the fire. We'll need lots of hot water. We'll need plenty of clean rags —and I'll bet there isn't one in the house."

Brook, following the agitated rancher, paused on the threshold. "Darlin' "—he masked profound relief and exultation with lightness—"when you're missus on this spread, I'll get you a bale of clean rags. Okeh, lady?"

She lifted starry eyes and twinkled, "Okeh, mister! Promise me pale green paint and red geraniums for the kitchen too, and I'll—"

"Get goin', hombre," Brook pushed the homesteader across the threshold. "I'll be with you in a minute." He closed the door. "Lynn, a while ago you wouldn't let me kiss you."

"Oh, but that was a while ago! Now is something else again. Oh, mister! I knew, from that first day in Seven Mile, that if you'd go on holding me tight and strong, you'd keep us both from going down!"

The Belled Coyote

THE gaunt and phantom-like belled coyote of the Western ranges—like the famed belled buzzard of Indiana—may never die. Its appearance is reported each year, as unvarying as the first robin of spring. It seems destined to become a legend, just like the belled buzzard which wings its high, solitary flight over the Kankakee Marshes of northern Indiana.

The history of the belled coyote does not date as far back as the time, a decade ago, when the Indiana farmer first attached the bell to the buzzard he found in a nest in a hollow log. But cowhands out West are constantly telling of the grim and mysterious coyote which stalks the ranges, and their stories are much alike. "I suddenly heard a soft, tinkling bell coming from across the the ranges," most stories go. "I looked up and there was the belled coyote—and I could see and hear the bell on the animal plainly."

Waddies say the coyote leads a charmed life. They tell of firing at it repeatedly, sometimes from close range, but apparently with no effect. Some have gone out with the announced intention of killing the belled coyote and ending once and for all the strange stories about it. Some ranchers have even used silver bullets, thinking this perhaps would end the charm which it carries. But still the belled coyote stalks the cattle on the Western ranges.

Doubtless the original belled coyote, like the belled buzzard, has long since died. But his fame, however, will hardly be permitted to diminish on the Western ranges. Each year, and from year to year as the cowboys gather about the campfires at night, they will tell of this phantom-like animal which hunts the ranges alone.

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Mervine's Return

By Lawrence A. Keating

He had won her once, two months ago, and now it seemed that he had lost her. But because Lon Mervine was a man four-square, his fighting heart carried him back into battle. Could he perhaps win again?

IT was late afternoon when Lon Mervine neared the old Pringle ranch. It was here Cap Ferris had said his daughter, Delia, might be found.

"She rode over for—uh—a friendly call," Cap had explained uneasily. He seemed startled at sight of Lon. "Goin' to stay to supper, I reckon; then she'll be back."

"Stayin' to supper with Jeff Pringle? How come?"

"Wall, no, not with Jeff. Yuh see, Pringle sold out to a gent named Wick Stenham. Mighty nice kind of a feller." Ferris' expression, as he watched Mervine, was troubled and apprehensive. "Yuh shore been gone a long time, ain't yuh?"

Yes, two months was a long time. Tall and lean, hard from twenty-two years in saddle and sun, Mervine, as he rode, kept his gray-brown eyes fixed eagerly on the clapboard ranch house

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ahead. He had not expected it would be so long before he saw Delia again. But neither had he expected Teton Turner to drive off eighteen blooded horses—the only stock of real value on Lon's small Triangle M. The wily range rat had staged his raid as Mervine rode home from Delia's, that night she had virtually promised to marry him.

Spying her now, he grinned and shifted the curl-brimmed black sombrero. Delia stood near the corral, as slenderly graceful as Lon's picture of her during his long convalescence from Teton Turner's bullet in that sheepherder's shack. She was stroking the muzzle of a coal-black horse and did not glance around as he approached, perhaps thinking him a Stenham rider.

He slowed his chestnut and swung from the saddle. Heart pumping faster, he walked toward her.

"Hello, Delia," he said in a tone as calm as he could manage.

She turned. One small hand fluttered startledly to her throat. Lon doffed his sombrero and stepped nearer, his arms wide. But a frown flashed across his face as, with a little gasp, Delia Ferris retreated.

"Lon!" In awe she repeated it. "Lon Mervine!"

"Yes, sir, Delia, I'm back at last. Been a long wait, honey? Gosh, these two months have seemed like two years!" He advanced, feeling that now her first surprise had passed, she would want to kiss him. The cherry lips were inviting, the large, dark eyes, turned full on him, stirred Lon Mervine as they always had done. But he felt new puzzlement as again she evaded his embrace.

"Don't, Lon. Please."

He stood fingering the brim of his sombrero, frankly disappointed. Delia was mighty sweet to look at in her buckskin skirt, white silky blouse, spur-jingling boots. A maroon tie fluttered at her throat. Her Stetson did not hide the tumbled dark hair that glowed with walnut richness even in the fading daylight. She made a picture that Lon gulped in hungrily, one he had kept in his vision those long weeks of recovery from the wound he'd got from Turner.

"Reckon I don't understand," he said in a low, hurt tone. "Aren't yuh glad to see me, honey?"

"Oh, Lon! Yes, of course I am. But I—" Her eyes wavered from his. "I didn't expect you!"

"That night I went off, Delia, yuh let me think—" He shifted weight to begin differently. "Of course I'm even poorer than before. I didn't get my hosses back from Teton Turner. They're sold long ago. That thievin' lobo!"

"Teton Turner?" Delia studied him oddly. "I don't understand, Lon."

"Sure! I explained in my note. It happened so sudden, I knew if I wasn't to be wiped out, I had to get on Teton's trail *muy pronto*. So I scribbled that note for yuh and left it on the table of my ranch house."

A hand crept to her throat again. "I didn't get any note, Lon!"

He stepped forward with a muttered exclamation. "Honey, yuh mean yuh haven't known these two months where I went? Didn't Joe Crawley, my puncher, see that yuh got the note?"

She shook her head numbly, her eyes soft with pain. "Joe couldn't explain it either, why you had disappeared without a word. I rode over the next day and found him there. The ranch house looked as though you had scraped together everything you wanted, and left. We couldn't understand it! I—"

"But honey!" He left off speechless, watching her with keen anxiety. "Yuh actually thought I'd—deserted yuh?"

Their eyes held an instant. "What else was I to think?" Delia pleaded.

Lon Mervine went numb all over. Slowly he gulped in air and expelled it. "You didn't write," she went on. "I kept hoping and hoping. . . . But no one knew where you'd gone. Oh, Lon,

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why didn't you write? Or why didn't you come to me and say you realized you didn't really care for me? It would have been—"

He caught one of her hands and pressed it between both of his. Lon swallowed, dismay etched deeply on his tanned face. "But Delia, I went after Teton Turner! Why, as I rode home from yore place I ran plumb into three gents, drivin' off those hosses in the swale. Yuh know, the blooded stuff I put all my savin's in, expectin' to start a mighty fine herd out of 'em?

"It was Teton Turner, up to his old tricks! Shot my hoss right under me. I had to leg it all the way to the corral for another. Knew they'd get a good start, and I couldn't tell how long it'd take to catch up with 'em. So I wrote a note to you and Joe Crawley not to worry and to get a posse out.

"To make a long story short, I followed those thieves near seventy miles. There was a hot tussle down in Oriole County when I thought I had 'em trapped. But I got shot, here in my side." He touched the place gingerly. "Next I knew I was in a sheepherder's cabin, hurt pretty bad, and I've been there most of the time since."

He watched her bury her face in her hands. "I couldn't write, honey. It was plumb lonesome there, and nobody to mail a letter. That Indian had his hands full with the sheep and carin' for me.

"Shucks, Delia," he pleaded with forced cheerfulness, "that's all over now. I lost out with Teton, o' course. My best hosses are gone, and I'm near broke except for some scrubs and my land. But I got well! I'm back!

"Now," he ventured eagerly, for the third time stepping close to the girl, "how about a kiss, honey? Ain't yuh glad to see yore sweetheart?"

Before she could answer, spurs jingled and a man strode from a tool shed some distance away. As he neared them he shoved back his hat, frankly curious about the newcomer. He halted close to Delia Ferris and, to Lon's amazement, slipped his hand through the crook of her arm. It was a gesture of intimacy that startled Mervine, made him suck in his breath jerkily.

"Wick," the girl faltered, "this is Lon Mervine."

The man grinned and extended his free hand. "Howdy, Mervine! I'm Stenham, Wick Stenham. Reckon I must've got this place from Pringle about the time yuh went off. But if yo're back to stay, we're neighbors and yuh want to feel right at home here."

Automatically Lon met the proffered hand. The new rancher had a candid air about him, likable and sincere. He was of medium height, but heavily muscular. He would be a tough opponent in a set-to, and he had a decisive swing to his shoulders that hinted he was plenty game.

"Howdy," the Triangle M owner muttered before he released the hand. "Yes, I reckon we are—neighbors."

"I run hosses, as I hear you do," Stenham remarked. He chuckled as he glanced fondly at the girl. "And Delia runs me. Anyhow, she will pretty soon. Won't yuh, honey?" Wick Stenham's arm went around her waist, and he exerted a slight pressure that made her sway against his shoulder.

"Yo're just in time to congratulate us, Mervine," the man proceeded happily. "Delia's just give in. Took a powerful lot of persuadin', but I'm about the cheerfulest man in Rock County this minute! We aim to be married soon. I say tomorrow. Don't yuh figure such things ought to be done without delay?"

Mervine's throat hurt. His brain was foggy, and he felt suddenly weak. For an instant, unable to reply, he merely stared at them in helpless, stunned amazement.

"Yo're a—a lucky man, Stenham," he stammered at last. "She sure deserves to be happy," He turned heavily on his heel to start away. "I better be gettin' on home. It's just about dark."

"No, hold on! We're goin' to have

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supper right off, and I'd like if yuh'd stay with us. Try out Delia's cookin' with me," Wick chuckled. "Honey, can't you talk him into stayin'?"

She moved hesitantly after Mervine as he paused. "Won't you stay?" the girl asked.

His mind was not up to its habitual resourcefulness. Though he tried, he could hit on no excuse that Stenham would accept, no valid reason for leaving.

Suddenly Mervine felt he wanted to stay. It would be his last sight of Delia, his only opportunity of studying the man who had won her while he was gone. For he knew already that he could not remain in Rock County. He could not keep up the Triangle M now, if every day he must see the girl he had long wanted, the wife of his rival.

"Thanks," Lon said slowly. "I reckon I'll stay."

While Delia went in to the ranch house to prepare dinner, the two men washed in basins on a bench outside. Answering Mervine's casually asked questions, Stenham explained that he had received a thousand dollars from the estate of an uncle. Hearing the old Pringle place was for sale, he had ridden out to look at it and ended by buying the spread.

"I've got some promisin' studs and mares," he told Lon. "Drift over in the mornin', and I'll be glad to show 'em to yuh."

Lon finished wiping his hands and laid the towel down. "Thanks. But I reckon I'll be givin' up the Triangle M now." He looked quizzically at his host. "Yuh wouldn't want to buy me out, cheap?"

Through the gathering dusk they eyed each other. Wick Stenham seemed to hesitate. "Nobody likes pryin' questions, but I feel I've got to put this one to you. Guess yo're about as much in love with Delia as I am, eh?"

Lon started. A shaft of yellow lamplight through a side window of the dwelling clearly illumined both their faces. He nodded at last. "I been in love with her a good long time, Stenham."

Wick moved his head up and down. "Seein' you two out there at the corral just now, I kind of guessed it. When I first met her she was—oh, sad-like, not much interested in anything, listless. She never told me outright, and I never asked. I started in to court her right off, but I wondered what had happened." He studied his hands with fixed intentness.

Lon could hear Delia inside the ranch house, tripping to and fro. It was peaceful over the range, growing steadily darker. The north star brightened in the vast sky of deepening blue. There were mingled odors of sage and range grass, horses and leather, the invitation of food.

Beginning in a low tone, Mervine sketched briefly his pursuit of Teton Turner, the horse-thief. He told how he had been wounded, laid up with an Indian sheepherder in a cabin, unable all these weeks to dispatch a letter back to Delia.

Just as he finished she called to them. "It's ready for you!"

Her musical contralto made them glance quickly at each other. "Yuh ain't blamin' her none?" Stenham asked. "She honestly didn't think yuh'd ever come back. It was just bad luck, I reckon. Delia hadn't anything else to think but that yuh'd pulled yore freight for good."

Mervine nodded. "She's true. I see she hadn't anything else to think. But I can't stay around these parts now. Yuh can buy me out for three hundred, cash. The land's worth that. I don't know yet how much of my scrub stock is still there. I'll hunt up Joe Crawley, my puncher, and find out. It goes in the deal."

They walked slowly toward the stoop, mounted it, and headed for the door. Wick Stenham put his hand on Lon's shoulder an instant.

"I'll buy," he said.

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AS they seated themselves at the table the two men felt they understood each other. The more Mervine studied Wick, the more he felt grudging approval. Stenham was near Lon's own age, clean-featured, intelligent-looking. It wasn't much consolation, but some, to know he had lost Delia to a real man.

The atmosphere, as they ate, was more or less strained despite Wick's efforts to keep up lively talk. Silences were frequent. Delia's eyes showed she had wept in secret. Her oval face blazed crimson when she caught Lon covertly watching her every move, every familiar gesture. Sometimes she grew pale and her hand trembled. Lon concluded to leave the first moment he decently could. It was just misery for all three of them while he stayed.

Hoofs throbbed out of the silent night. They scratched in the dusty yard as a horse went on its haunches. "Hey, Boss! Quick!" someone cried.

Stenham shoved his chair back. In two strides he reached the door and flung it wide. A bow-legged puncher stood panting before him, his left sleeve dark where blood seeped through.

"It's Teton Turner, Boss! He's—"

Listening, Lon Mervine uttered an ejaculation. His chair crashed against the wall. He leaped to the table where he had laid his cartridge belt and holstered forty-five. Lips tightened to make his mouth a mere slash, he jammed on his sombrero and almost collided with Wick, as they lurched for the door simultaneously.

"They came right through the willows there at the bend on Cold Creek," the waddy panted out. "Why, before Slim and me knew what was happenin', they had them hosses knotted! We pulled our hawglegs. Next I knew a slug took me . . ."

Lon, rushing around the corner of the house with the two men, stopped at a window. "Delia!" he called. "Yuh better stay here. It'll be safer. Wick and I'll be back as soon as we can!"

He saw her nod, white of face. Mervine had no time for further parley; he raced after Stenham and the wounded puncher. Saddles came off the top corral-rail; horses were pocketed in a jiffy. A yank at his cinch and Mervine forked his chestnut. He had not removed the bridle, which gave him a start over his host.

But Wick caught up with him as they hit the breeze. "Bud says they're headin' south toward the hills," he called. "Damn those hounds! It would sure be a service to the county to kill Teton Turner, Mervine!"

Lon gritted his teeth. "I want him alive!" he snapped back. His spurs touched the chestnut, and they streaked faster, faster into the night.

There were many stars out now, bright ones, fixed like bits of diamonds in the dark blue sky. You could distinguish any moving figure, make out the stubble-like formation of deep willows Bud had spoken of. Cold Creek gurgled its winding way over Stenham's property and across the west corner of Lon's own land. Teton Turner, he thought swiftly, would head down the creek a short distance, then strike at right angles for the cedar- and pine-covered hills. That had been his strategy two months ago, when he had run off Lon's horses. It was hard to track in those hills while they were dry.

Bud's mount was worn from work and from the quick trip to the ranch house. He had not taken time to saddle a fresh animal, and he dropped a little behind. Wick and Mervine kept up a fast clip, eyes roving for sign of a mass that moved. Suddenly Lon stiffened, his keen gaze riveted.

"That's them, ain't it? A ways to the left. Goin' like a box o' chocolates at a round-up. Stenham"—the words gritted through his clenched teeth—"I aim to get Teton. He's the one!"

"Yuh ain't got nothin' on me!" Stenham gritted back.

After leaping the narrow creek, they changed their course. Without discus-

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sion both men agreed to try to head off that black knot that was the moving horses. There was a chance to get across Teton Turner's path somewhere in the stretch of trees that poked their bayonet tops at the sky. They leaned forward and used their spurs.

The stolen horses streaked on. They had even increased speed, as if the thieves had spied pursuit. It was a contest between Teton Turner—he was sure to be there in person—and the vengeance of the looted ranchers. Lon kept raising and lowering his heavy sixgun in its leather. He felt no nervousness, but he was eager.

Into a cut they traveled hell-bent, and up the far rise covered with trees. Three-quarters of a mile ahead Teton still was going like the wind with his stolen horseflesh.

But sooner or later he must turn due south. That was what Mervine kept thinking. There would then be a good chance to head off the scoundrelly scourge.

Once Lon gasped as his leg brushed a cedar trunk. A moment later they sighted a lighter spot ahead, a clearing made a year ago when some careless rannihan had caused a small forest fire.

"He's got to come this way!" Stenham exclaimed anxiously.

While Mervine nodded, a roar as of distant thunder came out of the trees opposite them. The cream of Wick's saddle stock swept forth, like a great black bug crawling on a silver screen. On one side rode a tall, bony-shouldered man who lashed unmercifully at his own mount and the nearest of the score or so of horses. Seen dimly over the bobbing heads were two other members of Teton Turner's hell brood.

"Cut him out! Never mind the stock!" yelled Lon.

He drove his chestnut headlong into the clearing. The bony-shouldered man let out an oath that carried above the pound of hoofs. Stenham widened his distance from Lon, their objective being to trap Teton and let the horses go for now.

A bullet whizzed close to Mervine, in the lead. The whine of it seemed like elixir to his blood. He held his fire, but the cords of his hand, that clenched the lifted forty-five, went more taut, stood out like wires in his leather-tanned skin.

Teton tried again to hit him. The fellow had two guns, and he held the reputation of boring an ace at thirty feet. But the speed of his horse, covering uneven, pebbly ground, and the darkness and shadows from near-by trees, made accurate shooting difficult. Wick Stenham bawled to the raider to disarm. Teton fired once more, his bullet sweeping off Lon's sombrero.

At breakneck speed the trio came racing together. Orange flame jutted at Lon. Something struck his shoulder with such terrific force that he was almost pitched from the saddle. It was his left shoulder, and after that first hot slash it felt strangely cold and useless.

Then Mervine saw what had happened to Wick. His horse must have stepped into a hole, for the rancher shot like an arrow over the brute's ears to plow twelve feet of ground with his chin. Teton Turner had brought his gelding high on its hind legs. Seemingly confident he had done for Mervine, he leaned down, his dark-mustached face contorted with hate and ferocity. Deliberate murder was in his eyes. He meant to kill Stenham as the man struggled dazedly, unarmed, to his feet.

Lon flung his gun arm up. It seemed an hour before he could draw back his trigger-finger. His head swam so that he scarcely knew when the bark of his Colt rang out. As his horse stopped at the feel of slack reins, Lon reeled. He grabbed at the saddle horn with his gun-encumbered right hand, but missed it. The next instant he slipped down to earth, but by some miracle stayed on his feet, his weapon gone.

A stringy, black figure, Teton Turner, loomed close by. There was the creak of leather, a glimpse of the flar-

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ing nostrils of a horse. Then a gun barrel, black and menacing, was poked at Lon.

He struck it up. Desperately he plunged his good arm around his assailant, to yank him from the saddle. They went down, a squirming mass of arms and legs. Mervine was so weak he could only hang on, wriggle and wrench from the bristly face that scratched his, from the powerful, short-arm drives of a steely knuckled fist.

Lon hurled himself atop the man. Turner's gun was pinned under him. Chancing a knockout to his jaw, Mervine drove his one serviceable hand for the fellow's windpipe. While the man rained blows at his face and head and strove to grasp one of his sixguns, just out of reach, Lon clung, fighting groggily to hold on.

There was a sharp, crunching sound. Teton suddenly fell back. Wick Stenham helped Lon crawl to his feet, dishevelled and bloody, his shirt torn half down his chest, his left shoulder dripping gore from an angry, black hole.

They stared at each other a second. Then Wick fetched a lass rope and they trussed up the thief. A mile away they heard shots. It was Bud and his partner, Slim, battling for the horses.

"They'll save 'em," Mervine hazarded. "Teton bein' gone will throw a scare into those other hombres. They'll high-tail it to save their own skins."

Presently they had Turner conscious and mounted, his arms tied behind him. Stenham strode to his own horse, which was threshing on the ground. There came a sharp sixgun report, and the beast stiffened. When Wick returned he shook his head regretfully.

"He had a leg broken in two places."

Stenham mounted behind Mervine on the chestnut, holding the reins of Turner's horse. In silence and still bathed in perspiration from the tussle, they started back toward the ranch house.

But Lon swayed groggily. "I need —water," he mumbled thickly.

At Cold Creek they stopped. Stenham slid to earth and tied Teton's horse to a sapling. Then he helped Lon down, helped him to the creek. With a wet bandanna he washed and gently probed the wound. Lon reeled in excruciating pain, as with a last hot flash, the bullet dropped into Wick's palm. It had stopped against the bones of Lon's shoulder.

They straightened at the sound of a horse approaching. A mustang came close before Delia Ferris pulled it to a halt, slid from the saddle, and ran forward.

"Lon! Lon!" she cried in fear. "You're hurt! Oh, my dear, you're hurt!"

Stenham stepped back in sharp dismay. A wan half-smile forced to Mervine's drawn lips. He leaned heavily against the trunk of a cottonwood. "I'm all right. Reckon that side wound Turner gave me two months ago kind of got strained. See who we got there?" He could not help a note of weary triumph in his voice. "Our old pal Teton Turner, himself!"

Delia studied him with tense anxiety before she even glanced at Wick, then at the captive. Then her glowing eyes returned. Watching her, Mervine felt a thrill of exultation. Perhaps her affection was not dead. She had worried first about him!

"He shore saved my life," Wick told the girl in grateful honesty. "Teton had me cold. It'd have been murder. If Lon hadn't come up like a mountain cloudburst, I'd be one dead rancher, Delia!"

There was a roaring in Mervine's ears that warned him of growing faintness from rapid loss of blood. His side throbbed, and his head was giddy. He did not catch the next words spoken between them, but presently found Delia's hand on his arm while from her slender five feet four she gazed up at him through the gloom, searching his grim face.

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"Let me bandage your shoulder, Lon. You just can't go any longer without it! I've a silk neckerchief here that's clean. I'll dip it in the water."

With a bulldog shake he roused himself. "No," he said almost harshly. "I—I'll get on my way now. I'll take care of it when I get to my place. You and Wick take Teton along and give him to the sheriff tomorrow."

The girl stepped back. Her face wore a deep, worried disappointment as she stood with the neckerchief in her hand. She frowned and glanced dubiously at Stenham. Then Delia hurried to the edge of the swift creek and bent to dip the neckerchief. She straightened and came toward Lon.

"No," he growled again. "It's all—"

The scratch of hoofs drowned his words. With a jerk Teton Turner brought his horse around so swiftly that Stenham had to spring aside or be trampled. The next second Teton leaned forward, his arms miraculously free of their bonds. He swept Delia Ferris upward, hard against his side, and spurred his horse straight for the creek, to jump it.

Lon pawed for his rescued forty-five. Stenham's gun leaped out as he sized up the horse-thief's bold dash for freedom. He lifted his weapon, but hesitated lest he wound Delia.

Mervine saw the big gelding raise its forefoot for the jump. Awkwardly Lon clutched at the hard rubber butt of his gun with fingers that were cold and stiff. As he sighted, realization and debate flashed through his brain, the same that balked Stenham.

He might strike the girl instead of Teton. . . . Yet the rascally outlaw was kidnaping her! That thought decided him. Delia would understand the chance. She would want him to take it!

Lon fired.

The heavy roar muffled her gasped-out cry for help. With a crash the horse crumpled on the far bank. There came a slashing of hoofs, oaths from Turner, a low scream from Delia, hurtling down. Mervine was in the water up to his thighs while Stenham, slower of wit, realized that someone had fired from the bushes at the same time. He began to search.

Lon gained the far shore, waded out in two strides, and pitched his muscular frame at the bandit. In the struggle punctuated by curses from Turner, the smack of fists on flesh, and grunts from himself, Lon somehow managed to cover the fellow with his tall body. Then Delia came panting up and, with a hard swing of a broken branch, stilled Teton, made him crumple.

She dropped on her knees at his side. "Lon! Lon!" She whirled to Wick. "He's fainted!"

DIMLY and far away, the Triangle M owner sensed he was being lifted into a wagon. Later he was lifted out, while a worried contralto pleaded with the men. "Oh, do be careful!" When he opened his eyes it was to find a ceiling above him, four walls around him. Oil lamps blazed brightly. Close at his side, eagerly scrutinizing his every flicker of expression, was the tense, worried countenance of Delia Ferris.

Mervine blinked in puzzlement as he discovered his shoulder in a cast that was immovable. He lay in bed. This must be Stenham's place, for he could not recall having seen this room before.

"Lucky I happened to be over to the Hodges', eh?" Short, bald-headed Doc Lenly grinned and blinked owlishly through thick glasses. "Guess yuh can't move, Mervine, and yuh ain't supposed to. I got my own ways to hog-tie you fellows when yuh get too ornery!"

"Turner's pals were smarter than we thought," Wick explained. "When the boys separated 'em from the hosses, one sneaked back and cut Teton's ropes. Just lucky he didn't kill us all! Delia ain't hurt more than a few scratches, and we got that pal of Teton's who was hidin' in the bushes, as well as the old lobo himself.

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"By the way," he added, "when yore stock was run off two months back, this man o' Teton's followed yuh home. He ransacked yore place and found that note, so's there wouldn't be any posse, and nobody'd try to follow."

That explained much. Yet it seemed strangely unimportant at this time. While Doc Lenly bustled from the room Mervine kept watching Delia. He wondered about his status with her now. In his heart he knew Wick Stenham's hesitation to shoot might have cost the girl everything. Suppose she had been kidnaped by Turner!

She seemed to divine his thoughts. "I wanted you to risk that shot," she exclaimed gratefully. "Even if you had hit me, killed me, it would have been better than—"

She did not finish as she looked away. All three realized what Teton Turner was, how he might treat a helpless girl taken in a raid, the thieving purpose of which had been balked. Sight of Stenham's face glowing red because he had not fired, made Lon's pulse whip faster.

Wick moved confidently to Delia, standing beside the bed, and slipped his arm around her waist. Lon turned away so as not to see them.

"Yuh can't go ridin' off when yuh recover, Mervine. Delia don't want yuh to go. Why, I don't either!" he lied. "So if I buy yore ranch why couldn't yuh be foreman for us? Delia and I'll be gone a while on our honeymoon. We'll need someone to care for things."

Swiftly she moved from his embrace. Closing her long-lashed eyes, she drew a deep breath. "Wick, I'm sorry. When I saw Lon was wounded . . . it did something deep inside me that I had been fighting since he came back. I—I just knew!"

"Delia, don't" Mervine begged.

"And when Teton grabbed me I prayed for you to shoot. You got your gun first. But you hesitated. Lon knew how I felt. He has always understood me, Wick. Perfectly!" With shining eyes she gazed down at Mervine, her lips quivering.

Wick Stenham fingered a button on his shirt. His face under the weather tan became pale. There was a long silence.

"Sure," he said heavily at last. "I was afraid it was Lon from the first minute I saw yuh together. And when yuh ran up to him there at the creek, it was plain enough which of us means the most to yuh."

He gave a deep sigh as he moved to the door. With his hand on the knob he turned. "I just sort of swept her off her feet while yuh were gone, Mervine, while she was tryin' to tell herself she had forgotten yuh. But don't feel bad about me. I'm fond enough of her to mean this: I want Delia happy."

He opened the door part way. "About the ranch," Stenham remembered. "I'm ridin' tonight. You take my stock and land. Pay for 'em any time. I shore don't want 'em now."

They could hear steps to and fro in the outer room as Wick gathered his belongings. Then he was gone.

Slowly, and still almost afraid to credit his miraculous good fortune, Lon Mervine slipped his good arm around the girl's waist and drew her to a seated posture on the bed. The silken fringe of her rich dark hair brushed his cheek. Lon raised his face eagerly. He had waited two months, that seemed like years, for her kiss.

Delia's red, red lips drew nearer. Exulting, Mervine knew he had won her—again. And this time for always!

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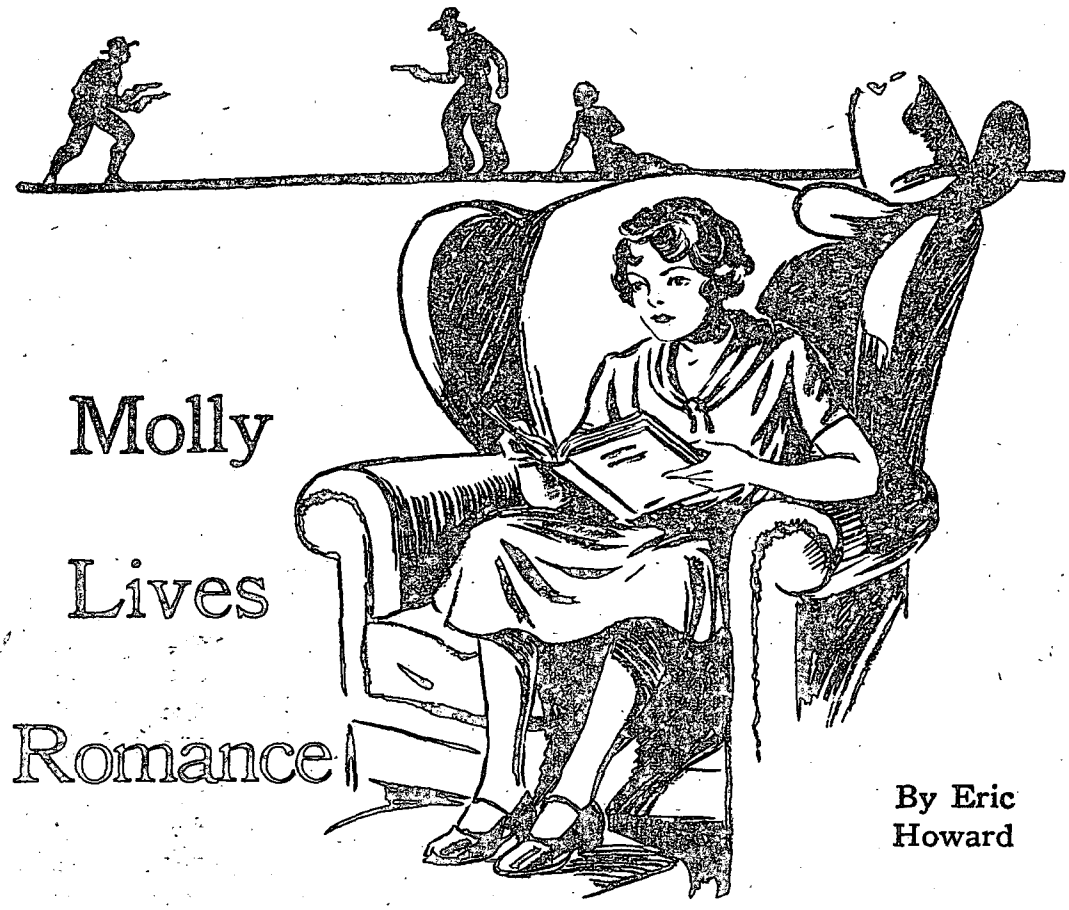

Molly Lives Romance

By Eric Howard

Molly knew that Jim Carr was all wool and a yard wide, even though her big sister didn't appreciate him. This troubled Molly mightily, too, for she thought Jim would make such a swell brother-in-law!

THE little girl, seated in a big chair, eating piñon nuts and reading a book, was oblivious of all that went on about her. Her older sister, Ruth, passed through the room and spoke to her. Her father, Luke Hunter, did the same. But little Molly Hunter didn't see or hear them. She never looked up from the book. At regular intervals she turned the pages with a flip of her hand, and reached into the Hopi bowl at her side for a fresh supply of piñons.

Even when Jim Carr came in, whistling familiarly, and stood before her for a moment, smiling at her, she didn't see him. And this was strange, for Jim Carr was the object of Molly's adoration at the moment. He hadn't been a Crooked H cowboy very long, but he had almost instantly become Molly's beau ideal. She trailed him all day long when he was working around the ranch house, and she talked about him constantly.

"Jim says—" became a regular refrain. Molly was forever quoting him. Luke and Ruth begged her to keep still, but Molly couldn't bear silence very long.

Once, when Ruth said sharply, "For heaven's sake, don't quote Jim Carr! He's just a saddle bum!" Molly saw red.

"You take that back!" she insisted, her small fists clenched at her sides, her eyes blazing with anger.

"Oh, all right," Ruth laughed. "Don't

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get het up over such a trivial matter."

"Jim is no saddle bum," said Molly, "and no other kind of bum. Jim is—" Her eyes shone and she groped for the right words.

"A perfect gentle knight," suggested Ruth in a tone of mockery.

"Yeah!" said Molly. "He sure is." Then she added suddenly, "An' a lot better than that Wally Abbott!"

Ruth hadn't continued the discussion, for she knew from experience that to do so would be dangerous. Molly might sometimes be at a loss for words, but she made that up, when she got started, by the vehemence she put into them. And she could attack Wally Abbott just as passionately as she defended Jim Carr.

But the book that engaged her attention, at the moment, was almost finished. The pages turned more rapidly now, and Molly forgot to reach into the bowl for piñons. She sat erect and tense, breathing hard as she followed the vivid scenes of the romance. She read everything she could find, from the mail-order catalogues that weighted down the mail bags of the Crooked H to the heavy, dog-eared volumes of an ancient encyclopedia, which her father had bought from an itinerant book agent. The novel she was now reading was one that an admirer of Ruth, somewhere in the East, had sent her.

But to Molly it was more than a story. The characters were not merely the creatures of an author's imagination; they were utterly real, as real as Jim Carr, Wally Abbott, Ruth and herself. In fact, the hero was very much like Jim, and the villain was, in Molly's mind, a dead-ringer for Wally Abbott.

The girl of the story—well, she was like Ruth, when Ruth wasn't acting "big sisterly" and snooty. Molly was certainly relieved when the girl came to her senses and recognized the sterling worth of the hero, after having been under the spell of the suave villain for all too many chapters. She sighed as she closed the book and let it fall to her lap. Then she stared out of the window.

Jim Carr came back through the room, whistling as usual, and she looked up at him intently.

"Howdy, young lady," said Jim. "Got your homework all done?"

"It wasn't homework; it was a story."

Jim nodded solemnly. That was one thing Molly liked about him. He didn't laugh and slap his thigh whenever she said anything, the way Wally Abbott did.

"The boss is sendin' me over to Simpson's. How's for a ride?"

Molly leaped to her feet, snatched a handful of piñons and nodded.

"I'll be right with you."

Jim went on to the door, while Molly dashed into her room and quickly changed her dress for a pair of Levis and a boy's shirt. Then she seized her hat, an exact replica of her father's except in size, and hurried out of the house. Jim was saddling her horse when she reached the corral.

They rode off together, side by side. A mile away they passed Wally Abbott, who was riding fast. He waved to them and went on. Molly turned and made a face at him. Jim chuckled.

"Don't make faces at bankers," said Jim. "They're the backbone of the nation, an' in times like these you never know when you'll need 'em."

"Huh! I don't like his looks, or anything about him. I wouldn't put any money in his old bank."

"What would you do with it?"

"I'd bury it in a tomato can, like Old Man Simpson."

For a moment she was silent. Then she asked, "What would you do with money, Jim?"

He laughed. "If I ever had any, I s'pose I'd spend it in riotous livin'. Yeah, that's prob'ly what I'd do. But if I had any sense, I'd buy up one of these outfits that's been foreclosed an' try to make it over into a ranch. No use talkin', though—I'll never get any money."

"Why not?"

"You can't accumulate a fortune on fifty per an' keep," said Jim solemnly.

"I guess not. But you might win a re-

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ward for capturin' a badman, or you might inherit some money, or something."

"I reckon the badmen are all caught up, Molly, or else too blamed slippery to get caught. An' there's nothin' to inherit."

Then he began to whistle, but the tune seemed unusually mournful. And as they rode on toward Old Man Simpson's place, Molly was silent and thoughtful. It was certainly funny that Wally Abbott should be what her father called "well fixed" and that Jim should be a poor cowboy. It wasn't fair. Still, if Ruth had any sense, she would see how much more admirable Jim was.

Old Man Simpson was as sick and grouchy as ever. Luke Hunter had sent Jim over to see if there was anything he wanted, anything they could do for him or bring him from town.

"Nothin'!" snapped the old man. "Mebbe Luke thinks I can't help myself, huh! Well, he's wrong!"

"Sure, sure," said Jim gently. "We all know that. Still, it might be kind o' inconvenient for you to leave your ranch."

Simpson glared at him suspiciously, but Jim had a way of winning people. The old man gradually softened and before long had made out a long list of the things he wanted.

"I can pay for 'em!" Simpson announced. "I got plenty money."

"Sure you have," Jim agreed.

The old rancher got up and hobbled into another room, returning presently with several gold coins clutched in his claw of a hand.

"Gold!" he cried. "The only kind o' money worth havin'. Gold!"

"Yeah, but it'd be safer somewhere else," suggested Jim.

"Ha! In a bank, mebbe you mean. No, sir! My money don't go in any bank. I know this feller Abbott—I knew his father before him. I wouldn't trust 'em from here to sundown. The old man made his money outa skinnin' people, an' the young one's a chip off the old block."

Jim made no comment, and Simpson rapped the floor with his stick.

"I ain't sayin' that mebbe somebody wouldn't like to rob me, but I'm ready for 'em. Anybody that breaks in here for gold is goin' to get lead!" He let out a shrill cackle of pleasure. "Yes, sir!"

"That's the spirit," said Jim. "I guess everybody knows you too well to try to rob you. Well, we got to be gettin' back."

WHEN they returned to the Crooked H, Molly saw Wally Abbott sitting beside Ruth on the veranda. Jim took her horse and handed her old Simpson's list and gold coins to give to her father.

"Where have you been?" Ruth asked, as Molly approached the house.

"Over to Simpson's with Jim."

"You should tell us where you're going," Ruth rebuked her. "Dad and I didn't know where you were."

"My gosh, do I have to make a report of everythin' I do?" demanded Molly.

Wally Abbott laughed, and the little girl glared at him fiercely.

"Dad wants you," said Ruth. "Go right in."

"Well, that's what I was doin' when you stopped me," Molly assured her. "I got Old Man Simpson's list here, an' the gold coin he gave us to pay for his stuff."

When she entered her father's office room, he also asked her where she had been.

"That's all right, if you were with Jim," he smiled. "But I don't want you ridin' around alone. The range ain't as safe as it used to be. Wally's been tellin' me that some of the men that have lost their ranches are actin' ornery. Can't tell what they might do. You stay close to home, unless you're with somebody that can look after you."

"I guess Jim could do that," said Molly.

"Yeah," Luke Hunter agreed absently, tapping his desk with his fingers.

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"Run along, honey, an' get a dress on. We got company for supper."

"Wally Abbott!" she sniffed. She handed her father the list and the gold coins.

He clucked his tongue. "Simpson shouldn't keep his money there. It's a temptation to others."

"He's ready for 'em. He told us that anybody that tried to steal his gold would get lead."

"Yeah, he thinks he's as good with a sixgun as he was years ago. But he ain't. Run along, honey."

At supper, Molly was silent. But she listened attentively. Wally Abbott did most of the talking, except for an occasional question from Luke Hunter or a comment by Ruth. And he talked mostly about himself—how he had tried to help the ranchers whose places were mortgaged; how he had extended their time and given them every chance to meet their obligations; how he had been compelled to foreclose in order to protect his bank and his depositors. Molly saw that Ruth was very much impressed. But she remembered what Old Man Simpson had said, and his opinion served to reinforce her own dislike of Abbott.

That feeling grew when she saw him lead Ruth outdoors. They sat on the veranda together long after Molly had been sent to bed.

THE next morning, right after breakfast, Molly walked down to the corral. A puncher working there told her that Jim and another waddy had left an hour before to build fence up on the north line. Molly decided that she'd go up there, too. She had read everything on hand, and there was nothing interesting to do at the house. She was leading her horse out of the corral, after the puncher had roped it for her, when Ruth appeared.

"Where are you going, Sis?" she asked.

"Up where Jim's workin'."

"Jim!" exclaimed Ruth. "Maybe he doesn't want you hanging around."

"He'll say so, if he don't. I don't bother him any. I've got to do somethin', haven't I?"

"But Dad doesn't want you riding around alone. He told you that. Some of these men are blaming him, as well as Wally, for losing their places, just because Dad is one of the bank directors. Wally said some of them are desperate. Why, they might try to kidnap you."

Molly laughed. "Anybody that kidnaps me will have his hands full," she boasted. "Anyway, Jim's right up there on the north line. I won't be ridin' alone very far. Don't let Wally scare you. He's just a windbag an' a chip off the old block."

"Molly!" said Ruth, blushing as the puncher laughed.

"I'm just quoting Old Man Simpson," said Molly virtuously.

"Well, don't!"

But Ruth returned to the house, and Molly rode off, presently, at a lope.

Late in the afternoon Jim and his companion returned, but Molly wasn't with them. Ruth was sitting on the veranda, and she called to Jim. He rode up to the house and took off his Stetson.

"Where's Molly?" Ruth demanded.

"I don't know," Jim replied. "Ain't she here?"

Ruth's face was white as she stared intently at him.

"Hasn't she been with you? Why, she started this morning—she said she was going up where you were working. Haven't you seen her?"

"No, ma'am. She didn't come up there. But maybe she changed her mind."

Jim spoke in his usual calm, unhurried way, and Ruth twisted her hands in exasperation. She didn't know that behind Jim's calm exterior his mind was seething. He was afraid, as he had almost never been afraid before. If anything had happened to little Molly—

"You must do something!" cried Ruth. "Don't stand there! Do something! Wally was saying, only last night, that some of the men around here were des-

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perate, hating Dad as much as they hate Wally. Maybe she's been kidnaped."

Jim looked at her quickly, sceptically, then whirled his horse and rode down to the bunkhouse. She saw him dismount and go into the long building. When he came out, he was wearing a gun and carrying a rifle in his hand. Swinging into the saddle, he again rode up to the veranda.

"I'm goin' to look for her," he said.

Before Ruth could speak he had ridden off. It struck her, a moment later, that she had urged him to do something and that he was doing it, alone. She regretted her words. She should have called her father. They should have discussed it. If a search party went to look for Molly, all of the men on the place should join it. She remembered that Jim had been working hard all day, that he had had nothing to eat since noon.

"Oh, I shouldn't have sent him!" she cried, and turned swiftly to enter the house in search of her father.

THE sun was low in the west when Jim started out, but there was still plenty of daylight left for him to read the trail. He followed the signs left by Molly's horse, which had one odd shoe on its left hind foot. She had started for the north line, all right, and had evidently intended joining him.

He came to a narrow, dry wash, and he got off his horse to look more closely at the signs. It was here that Molly had been halted. Instead of continuing over the ridge to the north line, the trail now struck off to the west, toward Simpson's. And Molly was not alone. The hoofprints of two other horses appeared in the sand and could be followed up out of the wash into the rolling hills.

Jim inwardly cursed the men who had dared kidnap Molly on the Crooked H range. Whatever they had against Wally Abbott, or even against Luke Hunter—although Jim knew that Luke had done his best to prevent the foreclosure of his neighbors' ranches—did not excuse this crime.

When he neared Simpson's house, he heard a careless whistle. His heart leaped. That was Molly! She was whistling a tune that he had often whistled as they rode together. Game little kid, trying to keep up her courage!

The sun had set, and a shadowy dusk had come. Jim swung down from the saddle, leaving his horse behind a shed, some distance from the house.

As he walked forward slowly, he heard a door open and shut. Then a man crossed from the house to a cabin that had been Simpson's first dwelling. Jim waited and watched, listening to Molly's low whistle, wondering where she was. The man halted at the cabin door and fumbled with the padlock. Then he swung the door open, and Molly's whistle sounded clear and strong.

"Shut up, you kid!" commanded the man who had opened the door. "I told you to keep still in here till we get through with the old man. An' I meant no whistlin'!"

Molly's reply was a loud, sustained, mocking note, which brought an oath from the man, who stepped quickly into the cabin.

"If you want to keep me from whistlin'," said Molly boldly, "you've got to gag me. An' if you try that, I'll bite your hand off."

"Damned little wildcat!" the man growled.

"Wildcat! You'll think I'm a tiger before you get through! An' if you torture poor Old Man Simpson any more, I'll pay you back! You let him alone an' you let me alone! If you got any sense, you'll beat it now—while you're still alive! If my dad or Jim Carr catches you, you'll be buzzard meat, that's what!"

Jim, stealing closer to the cabin, heard the sharp sound of an open hand striking Molly's face. But she uttered no cry. Instead, the man who had struck her groaned as she fought back.

Jim was rounding the cabin to the

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door, when a cry came from the house. The man in the cabin ran out, yelled something to his companion in the house, and then swung the door shut on Molly, snapping the padlock. Running toward the house, he passed within a few feet of Jim.

The cowboy went to a high, small window at one side of the cabin, where he heard a faint sob from within. He tapped the window and called the girl's name.

"Oh, Jim, darling!" she called in a choked voice, coming to the window. "I knew you'd come, an' Lordy, I'm glad you're here."

"I'll bust this window an' lift you out, Molly. Then we'll ride for home. Can't take any chances till I get you safe."

"You can't do that, Jim!" she protested. "They're in there torturin' Old Man Simpson, tryin' to make him tell where his money is. On the way here they talked about it—said they'd better make a complete job of it an' get all they could. Don't let 'em hurt him, Jim. Go in there an' stop 'em."

"But I've got to get you away, safe. Luke—an' Ruth—would never forgive me if I didn't take you right out o' here."

"You can't! Listen! That's him cryin', Jim. They're hurtin' him! Please stop 'em! I'll be all right here, till you come back. Gosh, do you think I'm afraid of the dark?"

"No, child," Jim gulped, "I know you aren't afraid of anythin'. But—"

"Go on, Jim! Dad would never forgive you if you didn't help him."

"All right," Jim nodded. "I'll do what I can. You keep still, Molly, till I come back."

"I knew you'd come, Jim. You're swell!"

Jim's eyes were misty as he turned toward the house. Molly was an adorable child. Ruth had been like that, too, when he had first joined the Crooked H outfit. But Ruth had changed. Wally Abbott, who was handsome and rich, was the man Ruth loved. Jim supposed they were engaged. Well, he would drift on soon. An old friend had acquired an outfit down on the Ruidosa; he'd go down there. But he was going to miss Molly—and Ruth.

As he stepped up to the door of the house, he heard a groan from Simpson, followed by a ringing oath. The calm caution that was habitual with Jim suddenly left him. He thrust open the door and sprang into the room. There was a lamp on a table, in the center of the room, and Old Man Simpson lay on a cot against the wall. A large man, with his back turned to Jim, was bending over the old man, twisting his arm.

Jim sprang at him, seizing him by the throat. Old Man Simpson let out a cackle of delight, calling Jim's name.

Jim pulled the torturer away from Simpson, and they crashed to the floor, with Jim clinging to the other's throat. He heard a door open, and realized that he had overlooked the second man's presence in the house. But he was getting a great satisfaction out of throttling whoever had been punishing Simpson.

As the light fell on the man's bearded face, Jim recognized him as a nester named Briggs, who had lost his small ranch down in the valley. Briggs had been arrested for operating a still, some months before, and he had lost his land through his own shiftlessness; but he was just the sort to blame his misfortune on others.

"Look out, Jim!" cried Simpson from the cot.

Jim swung aside as Briggs' companion approached, swinging a gun. The descending weapon missed, but the man leaned down and jerked Jim's own gun from its holster.

"Break away, Briggs!" he commanded. "Let me fill him full o' lead."

Briggs hadn't much strength left, but he brought his fist sharply against Jim's jaw, thus loosening the cowboy's hold. Then Briggs jerked away, and Jim saw the gun in his companion's hand. The cowboy sprang forward a second before the gun roared, and seized the man by the legs, bringing him down.

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They rolled around the floor, fighting hard, until Briggs gained his feet and kicked Jim in the head. For a moment darkness closed in on him, and he couldn't move. Then, as he sat up, he saw Briggs and the other man, whom he recognized as Bill Dukes, a man who had worked for Briggs, standing over him.

Dukes was talking to Old Man Simpson.

"We're through foolin' with you," he said. "We waited till dark to get you, an' we ain't waitin' any longer. We know you've got money here an' we want it. You been sayin' you wouldn't tell us where it is even if we killed you. Now we're givin' you a minute to tell us—before we kill Carr here!"

"Tell 'em to go to hell!" snapped Jim.

For a moment Old Man Simpson didn't say anything. Then he sighed wearily.

"I'll tell you," he said. "I ain't got long to live anyway, an' it wouldn't matter if you finished me. But Jim's different—he's young, he's got his whole life before him. In the next room, there, under a Navajo rug, there's a little trap door. In there—"

Jim protested, but it was too late.

With a grin, Dukes turned to Briggs.

"Hold your gun on 'em!" he said. "I'll get the old boy's treasure."

Jim stood up and faced Briggs. "You'll never get away with this," he said. "It means life—or a lynchin'."

"Shut up!" snarled Briggs.

For no apparent reason Old Man Simpson chuckled.

Dukes had gone into the adjoining room. They heard him moving chairs. Now he was pulling the rug away, kneeling down over the little trap door. Simpson chuckled again, and Jim looked at him wonderingly.

There was a moment of tense silence, broken suddenly by the roar of a gun in that adjoining room. Jim heard a moan from Dukes and the thud of his body as he fell to the floor.

"I told 'em they'd get lead!" cackled Old Man Simpson as he heard the shot.

Briggs had turned involuntarily toward the door. He took a step in that direction, wondering what had happened to Dukes. Again Jim sprang for him, this time landing a well placed blow at the side of his head. Briggs went down, and Jim seized his dropped gun, bringing the barrel down against his skull.

"Good for you, boy!" cried Simpson. "I knew you'd do it. That's why I told him where my gold was. Go in an' look at that feller! Go in an' see what fixed him! I told 'em they'd get lead—not gold!"

Jim lifted the lamp and carried it into the next room. Huddled on the floor, at one side of the open trap door, lay Dukes. Blood stained the floor, and it required no examination to show that he was dead.

Jim peered curiously into the small space disclosed by the opening in the floor. He saw a metal box—the vault in which Old Man Simpson kept his gold. And he saw, also, a curious contraption which held a revolver in place, its barrel pointing upward at an angle of forty-five degrees. It was this gun that had killed Dukes.

As Jim knelt at one side of the trap door, he noticed a thin wire running from the door to the trigger. The wire was so long that the trigger did not move until the door was flung open, until a man would be bending over the aperture, intent upon seizing Simpson's treasure.

"In-gee-nious, huh?" asked Simpson.

Jim nodded soberly. Then, with a glance at Briggs, he asked Simpson for a rope. The old man brought him a looped lariat, and he bound the man securely. Finally, taking a key from Dukes' pocket, he went out to the cabin.

"Jim?" asked Molly as she heard the key in the lock.

"It's me, all right," he told her.

"Gosh, I'm glad! When I heard that shootin', I was afraid!"

As he opened the door, she ran to him and flung herself into his arms. As he lifted her up and carried her over to the

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house, she planted a moist kiss on his cheek.

When they went in, Simpson was talking to Briggs, who, bound and helpless, stared up at them in fear. When he spoke, his voice was a whine.

He was blaming Dukes. He hadn't planned to rob Simpson; that was Dukes' idea. He had opposed it all along. And he hadn't wanted to kidnap Molly; that had been forced on him, too. He was desperate; he needed money; he had been hired to kidnap her.

"Who hired you?" demanded Simpson. "Tell us that! Come on, see if you can lie yourself out o' this!"

Briggs' eyes moved restlessly, from one to the other.

"Abbott!" he whined. "Wally Abbott hired us—an' if he thinks I'll go to jail for him with my mouth shut, he's wrong! He wanted us to take the kid up in the hills an' send a note demandin' money to Luke Hunter. Then he was goin' to come up there an' rescue her. He wants to marry her sister an' he wasn't makin' any headway. He figgered if he could be a hero or somethin', she'd fall for him. An' he wants Luke's backin'. He pretends he's rich, but he ain't. His bank's shaky, an' he wants to get Luke behind him before he fails."

"Huh!" said Molly. "You might 'a' known Jim would rescue me. I wouldn't get rescued by Wally!"

"We're ridin' home," Jim told her. "We'll send the sheriff out to pick up these fellers, old-timer. Don't let Briggs get away."

"Jest let him try it! He'll join Dukes if he does!" Simpson responded.

IT was not until Molly and Jim were near the Crooked H ranch buildings that Jim spoke of what was on his mind. "Molly, we won't say anything about Abbott. We'll let that go, until Briggs talks at the trial."

"Why, Jim? Don't you want Ruth to know? You love her, don't you?"

"Can you keep a secret, Molly?"

"Sure!"

"Then I do love her. I always have, I reckon. But I guess she's in love with Abbott, an' I don't want her to hear anythin' against him from us."

"Gosh, if Wally had staged his crazy rescue stunt, he'd be crowin' about it, tellin' Ruth what a hero he is!"

"Maybe, but that's the way I feel."

Molly reached out and put her hand on his arm. "I know, Jim. You're real."

He laughed lightly and they rode on. At the sound of their approach, Ruth ran from the house.

She caught Molly in her arms, laughing and sobbing, and held her close. Luke and his men had gone in search of her; Ruth was alone and worried sick.

"Heck, I'm all right," said Molly. "Between me an' Jim, those old kidnapers didn't have a chance." She went on to tell Ruth of what had happened, giving a vivid account of Jim's heroism.

He laughed disparagingly. "Now don't stretch things, Molly. What I did was blamed little."

"I'm hungry!" Molly announced, running to the house.

Jim started away toward the corral, but Ruth's hand was on his arm.

"Thanks, Jim! I knew we could count on you."

"Sure," he mumbled. "Any time!"

He edged away, lest he surrender to his impulse to take her in his arms.

"Jim, dear—I've been an awful fool! I've been half blind, I think—blind to what I've always really known, deep in my heart. Once, a long time ago, you said—"

"Ruth, honey!"

Then she was in his arms, and her lips were lifted to his. For a long moment they stood thus, and Jim was glad that Ruth had discovered her love for him before she learned the truth about Abbott.

"Hey, Jim!" came Molly's voice from the veranda. "If you want anythin' to eat, you'll have to hurry. I'm devourin' everythin' that's in sight—except beans!"

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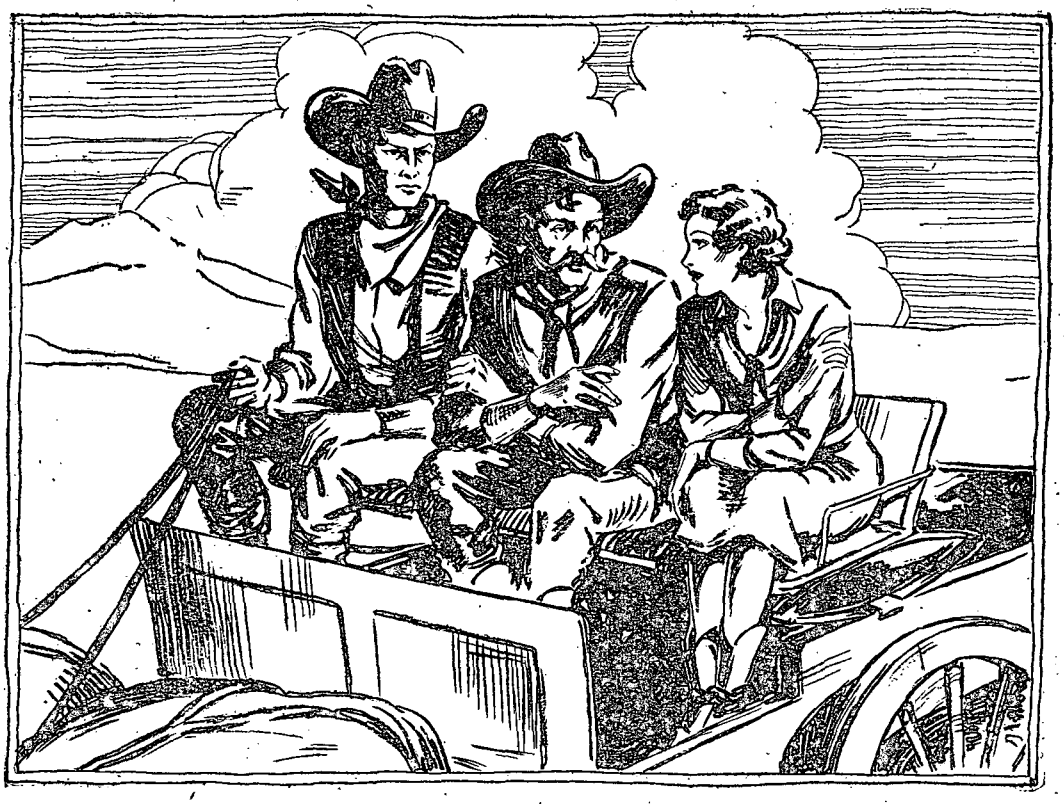

The Battle of Blanks

By John Johnson

Old Gila's intentions were good, but he proved to be more of a hindrance than a help, when he tried to mix up in the young folks' love affairs.

THE two partners of the Flying N O Ranch were a strangely assorted pair. Gila North was a wind-jamming old reprobate, ex-Indian fighter, deputy, and vigilante, now settled down to more or less peaceful ranching and bedeviling his neighbors. Ted Owen was a tall, sandy-haired young ranny with level gray eyes and an infectious smile, soft-spoken and easy-going, liked by everyone. Somehow these two got along very well together. Theirs was an uneventful partnership till one afternoon when they chanced to drop in on their neighbor, Cramton, at the Diamond C.

There was a newcomer there from Arizona, a girl named Mary Wallace. She was a friend of Mrs. Cramton and was visiting the Diamond C for a few weeks. Mary Wallace was very pretty, with a vivacious manner and flashing wit. Somehow, when Ted Owen departed from there he was no longer the same.

"Ain't she wonderful, Gila? She's the prettiest girl I've ever seen!" declared Ted.

Gila smoothed his grizzled thatch of hair reflectively. "She's got a pretty face and a trim figger, only she's a mite thin and her nose turns up at the end," he replied. He usually disagreed with

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everyone just for the sake of argument.

Ted snorted. "But her eyes, yuh old fossil—eyes blue as the sky, and hair black as night! Yuh don't see that combination very often!"

The next evening Ted dressed up carefully. He explained that he was going to the Diamond C to borrow some coyote traps—articles that were not at all needed on the Flying N O. Then he rode away.

This was the beginning. Then, six weeks later, Ted said, "Gila, I'm in love."

This was no news to the old cowman. For the past month Ted had been showing all the symptoms; going without much food or sleep, walking around in a day-dream, and spending most of his time at the Diamond C.

"Well, go ahead and marry her. Maybe then yuh'll be able to think a little about ranchin' again," said Gila. "Does she care about yuh, Ted?"

Ted just shook his head glumly, whereupon Gila jumped up angrily, crying, "Where's my hat? I'm ridin' over to give that Wallace girl a piece of my mind! What's the idea? Yo're good-lookin' enough to get by. Yo're a full partner in the smallest and most hopeful cow outfit in Sherwood County, and yuh c'n hold yore own with any tough around here, gun or fist! Why, dang it all, she can't turn yuh down, and I'll tell her so! Just yuh wait here. I'll fix it for yuh!"

Ted pushed Gila into a chair. "D'yuh want to spoil everythin'? Yuh can't go at this like yuh was jumpin' a claim or bluffin' a low pair through at poker. Yuh can't handle women that way! Anyway, I ain't even asked Mary to marry me yet."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I—I just ain't had the nerve," Ted confessed. "If I proposed and she said no, that would end the whole thing. I wouldn't have the nerve to ask her again. So I've been afraid to put it to the test."

"Well, if yuh don't tell her yuh love her, how's she goin' to find it out?" cried Gila, who could not understand shyness, having none himself.

"I know that, and she's leavin' in two weeks, too!" said Ted. "Gosh, I don't know what to do! If I could only get her to like me a lot, sudden-like—sort of clinch things—"

"Boy, the trouble with you is, yuh ain't had no experience with females," Gila broke in. "Yuh need some expert advice, and I'm yore man. When I was yore age I had half a dozen girls pinin' for me all the time." This was exaggerated, but Gila figured he might as well make it strong.

Ted exclaimed scornfully, "Yo're a hard-shelled old bachelor, Gila. What do you know about girls? Just let me handle this."

But Gila was supremely confident of his expert ability in every line. "Just the same," he said, "I'll go along with you two Saturday when yuh drive to town for supplies. That way I'll get better acquainted with Mary and get a line on her. Then I c'n tell yuh what to do."

So the following Saturday afternoon Gila was on the buckboard with Ted when they called at the Diamond C to get Mary.

It was a fine day. All the world seemed bright and colorful—blue sky above, and below green-carpeted range dotted with gray-green sage and gay prairie flowers. Mary seemed very happy.

"Summer's much lovelier up here than it is at home," she told Gila.

"It's a fine place to live, Mary. Yuh oughta marry some young buckaroo around here and settle down," said Gila. The girl flushed and laughed at this, while Ted nudged Gila into silence.

Soon the buckboard was rolling down the single dusty street of Bluffton, while Gila exchanged hearty greetings or black looks with men on the sidewalk, depending on whether the parties involved were friends or foes.

There was fox-faced little Copey

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Marsh, owner of the Circle 6 which lay just south of the Flying N O. At the sight of him old Gila half reached toward his holster and barely suppressed an angry curse. Ever since the new survey a year ago, which had definitely placed one of Copey's claimed water holes on Flying N O range, there had been bad blood between the two outfits. Copey lacked the nerve to tackle the two hard-fighting partners directly, so he expressed his bitter spite in roundabout ways, such as malicious gossip, secret destruction of Flying N O fences, and the like.

A little further on, Gila bristled again. This time it was not a personal enemy. Gila had never had any dealings with Bat Newberry, a burly, shirtless ne'er-do-well, the town badman. Bat wore two guns tied low and boasted what a gunslinger he was, but he had always confined his bullying to easy marks, having no wish to rouse the fiery old cowman. Gila disliked Bat simply on general principles, and because of his ugly, coarse, scarred face and insolent, swaggering manner.

Ted and Mary bought supplies for both the Diamond C and Flying N O, while Gila circulated around town looking up old cronies. When Gila rejoined the young couple at the general store Mary was absorbed in a book she had picked up from the counter.

"May I borrow this book, Mr. Smith?" Mary asked the storekeeper, and at his nod of consent took it along. As they all got into the now loaded buckboard Gila glanced at the title. It was "Early Gunfighters of Sherwood County."

"Well, I didn't know yuh was interested in gunslingers, Mary," remarked Gila.

"They interest me very much, in a way," replied Mary. She noticed Bat Newberry with a couple of his friends leering at her from across the street, and flushed. "Who is that terrible looking man?" she asked, with a gleam of startled interest in her blue eyes.

"That's Bat Newberry, our local six-gun champeen—that is, he's been champeen so far," replied Gila. "Want to meet him?"

Mary shuddered as she shook her head, and Ted turned to glare fiercely at Bat, who looked away.

They left Bluffton at sunset, and twilight faded to velvety darkness on the homeward ride. It was a night for romance, but Gila, seated between Ted and Mary on the buckboard seat, had other ideas. He was busy pouring a flood of gunfight stories into Mary's receptive ears.

"Did you ever hear of the Mesquite Kid?" she asked at last.

"Course. He was around these parts off and on, twenty years ago. He went to the smoke with Fanner Ogden in the general store once. And right up here at the trail forks is where he downed Smoky Miller. That was the year 'fore the marshal got him down in Laredo."

"The Mesquite Kid was a badman, wasn't he?" she asked in a muffled voice.

"Bad as they come, Mary," agreed Gila. He added a dozen more wild tales, kept his tongue going so constantly that Ted could not get a word in edgewise.

Next morning Gila told Ted, "Boy, I know just how to solve yore troubles."

"From the way you ran on last night, I figgered maybe it's you courtin' the girl instead of me," remarked Ted.

"None of yore sarcasm, Ted; just listen! I've found Mary's weakness. It's gunplay and gunfighters. Now yuh got to play up to that, savvy? The way to impress her is to play the gunslingin' hero in front o' her. Rescue her from a pack o' bad hombres, and she'll fall right into yore arms!"

"Even if I wanted to, how could I? Sherwood County's as plumb peaceful as a church," objected Ted.

"Use yore head, ranny. If there's no chance for a real rescue yuh c'n frame one, can't yuh? Hire a couple tough eggs to pop outa the brush some evenin' and fire off a few blanks. Then you give 'em some lightnin', blank-car-

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tridge gunplay, and then act wounded and run away. And the girl is saved, savvy? Take it from me, Mary'll go fer that. It'll be weddin' bells fer shore then!"

But Ted shook his head with a grin. "You think that gettin' a girl to become yore wife is somethin' like stampedin' a beef herd, Gila. Forget it. Love is—well, different. If she cares about me she'll marry me regardless, and if she don't, locoed plays won't help any. Even if I thought that such a trick'd win her I wouldn't do it. Knowin' Mary's been somethin' straight and fine; tomfoolery'd only spoil it. Now mind yore business, old maverick, and let me handle my own love affair!"

But rejection only spurred Gila's interest. He mulled over the situation for a few days. After all, Ted was young and inexperienced, needed help badly even if he didn't admit it. And who was better fitted to help than Gila North? At least, so thought Gila. He decided to go ahead on his own hook, Ted or no Ted, and rode in to Bluffton one afternoon.

He passed Copey Marsh in front of the bank, unsuccessfully tried to urge him into a fight by several uncomplimentary remarks, but Copey only glared in silent hate. Then Gila went on down to the Red Dog Gambling House, where Bat Newberry and two of his cronies were lounging by the hitch-rack.

"Bat, I want to talk to yuh," said Gila and drew him aside.

The tough was half-sullen, half-uneasy as he asked what was the idea.

"How'd yuh like to make forty bucks?" asked Gila. "No, it's not beatin' anybody up. Here's the lay! Saturday evenin' Ted Owen and his girl'll stop for a drink at Crystal Spring on their way home from town. I want you and two o' yore pals to stage a fake hold-up—shoot off blanks, yell out that yo're after the girl, and all that. When Ted opens up on yuh, yuh pretend to be all shot up and high-tail it away. That's all there is to it."

"Why don't Ted Owen arrange this himself?" asked Bat suspiciously.

"He ain't in on the play. He don't know a thing about it."

"So we take a chance on stoppin' his lead all in fun, eh? Nothin' doin'!"

"Don't worry, I'll fix that," replied Gila. "I'll load his sixgun with blanks without him knowin' it. There won't be any danger for you. If I'm on hand, I'll play dead at the first shot. You all wear masks, o' course, and nobody'll ever find yuh out. It's all perfectly safe. What're yuh scared of?"

"It all sounds damn locoed to me," growled Bat.

"Just a little practical joke," said Gila, not wanting to tell the real reason.

Bat was flat broke, and his little eyes gleamed greedily. "Make it fifty bucks," he said at last.

"Okeh, if yuh do a good job—make it seem real and dangerous."

"Don't worry, we'll put on a show that'll make their hair stand on end," laughed Bat.

"And mind, be very careful nobody gets hurt. Be sure you and yore men load up with blanks—and don't aim at the face, cause them paper wads c'n sting like hell," warned Gila.

"Yuh c'n bank on me," Bat promised.

Gila paid half the amount in advance and went back home.

THE next Saturday noon, while Ted was shaving, Gila changed the .45 cartridges in his sixgun for blanks. Ted changed his clothes, buckled on his gunbelt again unsuspectingly and took the buckboard to go after Mary as usual. Gila saddled his bronc and rode to town alone.

Several hours later, at twilight, Ted and Mary again took their homeward way. Gila waited a few minutes, then followed. Everything was set, and he wanted to be in at the climax, to see the battle of blanks and the favorable effect it would have on Mary's feelings toward Ted. "Cupid started this business, but it takes me to finish it right!"

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said Gila to himself as he rode along.

A full moon was already well up in the sky, its silver radiance brightening as twilight faded. Soon Gila overtook the slower buckboard. As he drew near Ted hastily removed his arm from the seat-back behind Mary and scowled. Although Mary greeted the newcomer pleasantly, Ted was vexed and tried to signal his partner to ride on and leave them alone. Once more the old cowman ruined a romantic evening by his presence, but he rode calmly alongside the buckboard, chatting endlessly, unmindful that in this case two was company and three was a crowd. He was determined to witness the frame-up he had arranged, and Ted's dark looks could not budge him.

They reached Crystal Spring, where they halted as usual to drink and water the horses. Gila tied the animals to a stunted willow to make sure they would not stampede in the coming mêlée.

Mary stood looking at the moon, remarking on its brightness. Beside her Ted was leaning over the spring, dipping a tin cup into the cold, clear water. At the other side of the girl stood Gila, nervous fingers drumming on his cartridge belt, staring at the nearby sage thicket as he waited anxiously. But his suspense was quickly relieved. At that instant three masked men burst out of the sage, guns leveled.

"Grab the girl! There she is!" came the shout, and a shot sounded. Gila grinned.

Ted drew by instinct, without thought. He pulled down on the closest attacker and fired just as the burly mask-bearer drew a bead on his own chest. The wad from Ted's blank cartridge smacked the mask-wearer squarely on the bare throat. With a howl of pain the fellow jumped and jerked his gun sidewise at Gila just as it went off. Gila felt a white-hot pain, a heavy blow. Then his right arm went limp, smashed just above the elbow by a bullet.

A bullet, not a blank! That leaden messenger said that this was no harmless horseplay, but grim reality. Gila realized that instantly. Mary was endangered! Unsuspecting, Ted had only blanks in his gun. He, Gila, was responsible! And his gun arm was crippled, while he couldn't hit the side of a house shooting left-handed. All this went through Gila's mind in a flash, even while he leaped into action. Springing in front of Mary, he shielded her with his body as he drew his gun with his left hand.

With a swing he struck Ted's blank-filled gun to the ground just as the youth fired again. "Here!" Gila shouted, and thrust his own gun, fully loaded with lead cartridges, into the astonished Ted's hand as another of the attackers' guns roared.

Ted did not pause to ask questions. He jerked his new weapon to a level and fired at the nearest bandit again, just before the other pulled trigger. The burly mask-wearer dropped. Ted pulled down on the other two, firing so fast that the reports of his gun seemed to blend into one. One of the other masked men reeled and cried out; the third threw himself flat; and then both of them turned and dove into the cover of the brush, disappearing from view. Two sets of hoofbeats drummed away.

A few minutes later the racing fugitives reappeared on a low ridge. Suddenly another wild fusilade broke out as one of the fleeing men emptied his sixgun in the general direction of the group at the spring. Ted suddenly lurched sideways and fell to the ground. Then the two riders dipped down the far side of the ridge, and were gone.

Gila ran to his fallen partner. The clear moonlight revealed a bloody furrow along the youth's scalp, and Gila soon realized with great satisfaction that Ted had only been creased by the chance shot.

The old cowman looked up to see Mary standing close, pale and wide-

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eyed, her hands clenched tight. "Is—is he dead?" she whispered.

"Just knocked out," answered Gila cheerfully. "He'll be right as rain in a minute." Ted began to stir as Gila dashed cold water on him. Meanwhile the old man talked of what a hero Ted had proved himself, laying it on thick. "Three to one—and he prob'ly half killed two of 'em! That's gun-slingin', Mary, even better'n any of those tough old-timers yuh been readin' about, even the Mesquite Kid. We c'n all feel proud o' him!"

Ted sighed and started to sit up, then fell back again.

A whinny sounded from the sage, and a saddled, roan horse came into view, evidently belonging to the downed bandit, tugging at his trailing reins, which were caught on some brush. Mary stared at the animal as though she had never seen anything like it before, and then suddenly she burst into dry, racking sobs that shook her from head to foot.

"Proud of him!" she cried, with a harsh laugh. "The Mesquite Kid was my uncle. I've been looking up about him, and found he was a dreadful, inhuman gunman, a killer. Do you think I'm proud of *him?* And this man"—she leveled a shaking finger at the prostrate Ted—"I was mistaken in him, but I see now. He's just another killer, another Mesquite Kid!" She covered her agitated face with trembling hands. "Oh! I never want to see him or think of him again!"

Gila was thunderstruck. This was going just the opposite of what he had expected! He did not see that the whirlwind smash of events had completely unnerved Mary for the moment. She was in the grip of the sort of hysteria which drives its victim to say anything. But Gila, not realizing this, accepted Mary's distracted outburst as a final, deliberate judgment. She was through with Ted forever, and it was up to him to save the day for his young partner, somehow! So Gila did a swift about-face.

"Yuh've got nothin' against Ted, then, 'cause he ain't really killed anybody," he said, forcing a laugh through throbbing pain. "Yuh see, Mary, this has all been in fun. Just take a look at Ted's gun over there—look at the shells!"

Mary picked up the weapon Gila had knocked from Ted's hand, shakily extracted a shell, stared wide-eyed. "Why, they're blanks!"

"Sure! I s'pose I oughtn't tell yuh this, but he arranged this whole fake ruckus to sorta impress yuh—make yuh think he's a hero, so's yuh'd care for him."

At this point Ted sat up abruptly with a startled gasp. He had caught enough of Gila's last speech to snap him out of his daze in a hurry. He began, "Say—" But Gila was not minded to have anyone interfere with his new plan. He snatched up a cup of water in his sound hand, knelt on Ted's legs and jammed the cup against his lips, forcing water down the shaky youth's throat so he couldn't talk.

"Quiet, boy," whispered Gila. "Let me fix this," and continued his recital to Mary.

"Course it was sorta foolish, Mary. But he don't know anything about women, and he's awful much in love with yuh. Couldn't bear to lose yuh. So he framed this play to sort of clinch things with yuh. Yuh see, everything's okeh. Nobody really got hurt; Ted just stumbled and struck his head. Yuh really gotta forgive him. A hombre that's that much in love'll make a grand husband."

At every word Mary stood straighter, seemed to pull herself together a bit more. When Gila trailed off into silence she had herself completely under control, although she was pale and tight-lipped. She looked down at Ted with cold scorn showing in her blue eyes.

"So that's your idea of how to win a wife, is it?" she said. "By cheap, disgusting vaudeville stunts! Well!" There was an icy finality in her voice

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as she turned away, untied Gila's bronc and swung into the saddle.

Ted dashed Gila's hand away and cried, "Wait, Mary! Let me explain!"

"I'm going, Gila. You can take the young hero home in the buckboard. I'll have your horse brought back tomorrow." Without a word or a glance at Ted, Mary urged her mount to a trot and dashed away.

Ted stood up, swaying, blood trickling down his cheek. He glared at Gila in silent accusation, while the latter protested, "What did I do wrong? First I told her the fight was real, and that didn't suit her. Then I told her the fight was faked, and that didn't suit her, either! What in blazes can yuh do with a woman like that?"

"Yuh wooden-headed old maverick, why couldn't yuh let me handle my own love affair?" cried Ted. "Now, great guns, I reckon I've lost her!" He glanced about wildly. His eyes fell on the bandit's saddle horse at the edge of the thicket. He rushed over, tore the reins free, mounted and raced away in the direction Mary had gone.

Gila bathed his throbbing broken arm, pulled off his vest and fashioned it into a crude sling to cushion the wounded member. Then he looked around, scratching his head. The fallen mask-wearer had managed to crawl away while they had been talking. Gila had thought him dead, and now realized that the mask-wearer had had a perfectly good opportunity to get any of them, had he not deemed escape of more importance. "That was Bat's roan bronc Ted rode away on, so Bat must be the one," thought Gila aloud. "And he was hit bad, so he couldn't 'a' got far."

Gila started noiselessly into the sage thicket, sweating and grinding his teeth against the fierce pain, driving himself on doggedly. Presently there was crackling of brush, and Gila stole up very close before the staggering man ahead noticed him, turned and slowly raised a revolver. Gila struck the weapon aside, clubbed the man's jaw with an iron-like fist, caught the gun and wrenched it from the fellow's weakened grasp. Then he tore off the man's mask.

"Didn't have enough steam left to mount yore bronc, eh, Bat?" said Gila. "Well, come on, let's go!"

After much prodding and painful effort he got Bat back to the buckboard, stretched him out in the wagon bed. Gila crouched beside the prostrate tough, and slowly drew the confiscated gun from his pocket. "All right, Bat! Start talkin'!"

"What yuh goin' to do?" demanded Bat Newberry.

"For one thing, I'm goin' to show you and myself to a certain young lady to prove this fight was real and not faked," said Gila. "For another thing, I'm goin' to turn yuh over to the sheriff fer attempted murder."

"Yuh can't prove that!" growled Bat, holding his bleeding side. "We just fergot to switch our bullets for blanks. Far as that goes, how about yore pardner—he was throwin' real lead himself!"

"Never mind that," snapped Gila. "Who put you up to gunnin' Ted, and why?"

Bat sneered. "Yuh got nothin' on me. Yuh hired us to put on your fake play, Gila; yuh'll have to testify to that yoreself! We just followed yore orders, only we forgot to switch to blanks; and they can't send yuh up for carelessness. That's the story I'm goin' to tell in court, and it sounds plenty air-tight to me."

"Usin' my little stunt to cover up yore real intentions, and the man behind yuh, eh? Not bad! It might get by at that," drawled Gila half to himself. "But maybe yuh'll never go to court, Bat."

"What d'yuh mean?" asked Bat, turning pale.

A frosty gleam came into the old Indian fighter's faded blue eyes. He held the sixgun against Bat's skull and pulled back the hammer. "I mean yuh better start talkin', Bat," he drawled

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with quiet deadliness. "And make it *pronto!*"

Bat took one look at him to see if Gila was in earnest. Then he talked, fast.

TWO hours later Gila and Ted met in front of the Bluffton jail just as the sheriff and two deputies were riding away.

"Gila, what's wrong with yore arm?" cried Ted anxiously, seeing the old cowman's bandages and sling.

"Bullet drilled it at the spring."

"Well, so it was a real gunfight, after all! With all yore explainin' this way and that, and the blanks in my gun, I couldn't hardly make up my mind whether it was fake or real. Only I was sure the bullet crease alongside my head was real enough, and Mary agreed with me. Now tell me what it's all about, Gila!"

Gila explained the whole thing from the beginning. "Finally I made Bat talk," he concluded. "Seems like, after I'd framed up the battle of blanks, Bat told Copey about it. Copey's hated us both ever since that survey, and he saw a chance to get even by havin' you plugged durin' the play. Then afterwards they c'd swear that the killin' part of it was all a mistake and wasn't intended—and get me to back 'em up. So Copey hired Bat to double-cross me, and drill you. Lucky I kept my own gun loaded! Bat's in jail now, shot up, and the sheriff's goin' out to arrest Copey for conspiracy to murder."

"And all this was s'posed to help make Mary want to marry me, eh?" asked Ted, grinning.

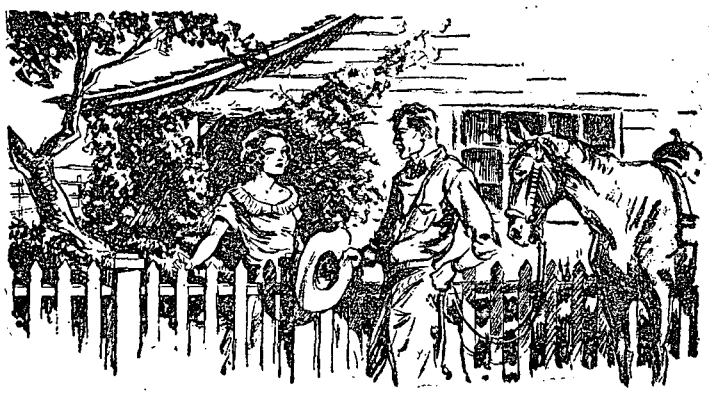
Gila nodded. "What are yuh doin' in town? Where's Mary?" he demanded.

"I had to talk like blue blazes, but I finally squared things with her again," said Ted. "I brought her in. She's down at the telegraph office, wirin' her parents to come to the weddin' next week. Her weddin'—and mine!"

"So yuh win, after all! Congratulations, Ted!" Gila grasped Ted's hand. Then the old cowman threw out his chest, beaming with satisfaction.

"Well, I fixed things for yuh, didn't I? It was sorta roundabout maybe, but after all results are what count. She's marryin' yuh, and I'm the hombre whose play clinched the deal!"

"You! All yuh did was dang near spoil everythin'!" laughed Ted. "I finally got up nerve to propose tonight, just as we left town, and she said yes, half an hour before yore tomfoolery started!"



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Fire Frenzy

A ROMANTIC SERIAL

By Marie de Nervaud

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER XLIII

Trapped

AFTER a few hours together, Kay and Marion felt as though they had known each other always. Their eager exchange of confidences had left very little to be learned about one another, and their mutual liking had ripened to a feeling of real friendship.

The girls decided to take a chance on leaving the hut long enough for Kay to show Marion where she had found the steel stud that she had later identified as coming from Josh Hastings' gauntlet. So, in the early afternoon, they went up to the scene of the murder.

Carefully stepping off the distances, Kay outlined her theory of what had happened, after relieving Flicker of his saddle, and tethering him by some of the luscious feed near the water.

"We have nothing but the vaguest circumstantial evidence against Josh Hastings," she explained. "But what we have, combined with the proof of his guilt in that other case, should at least prove strong enough to discredit him, if nothing more."

"The trouble is, that discrediting Josh Hastings isn't going to be enough to clear Ted's name," Marion worried. "I wonder if it wouldn't be better for him

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to disappear for a while, after all?"

"No!" Kay declared proudly. "This is the time for him to clear his name. And then, if what you say about his feeling for me is true—" She left the sentence unfinished, but the color that flooded her cheeks told her meaning for her.

"If only Dad is safe, and I can make him see reason, we might have a double wedding," Marion suggested. "I know you'll like Hal as much as I do Ted."

Forgetting their anxiety for the moment in their absorbing plans for the future, the two girls made their way back to the shack, pushing against the strong wind that swept up from the south.

"I hope this wind will die down," Kay exclaimed anxiously. "I don't want any more fires to reckon with! And there might be a chance of its reaching our timber ridge, although Shorty assured me it couldn't."

"Of course it can't," Marion answered. "These winds always spring up around noon, and die down again almost as soon as they've started."

"It seems to me the smell of smoke is much stronger." Kay sniffed the air.

"Naturally it is, with this wind." Marion pushed ahead. "That doesn't mean anything. But we must get back! We've been away too long now."

Once back at the clearing, that was sheltered by the surrounding timber, the acrid, burning smell was less noticeable. The girls forgot the fire in the discussion of their more personal affairs.

They decided to have an early supper and then take turns watching, so that one would always be on the lookout.

Marion insisted on Kay having the first rest, and promised to wake her at ten o'clock. Kay threw herself down on the bunk that Ted had occupied, and in no time at all was fast asleep.

Watching her through half-closed lids, Marion mused on the strange coincidence that had brought these two to her. Then she let her thoughts wander down the vista of the years, seeing a wonderful friendship ripen between Hal and herself, and Kay and Ted.

Gradually, her eyes closed entirely, and her head drooped to one side, as the relaxing sleep that had been long denied her in her lonely vigil, crept over her unawares. The lone candle flickered lower and lower and finally sputtered and went out, leaving the shack in inky blackness; but there was no sign of movement from either of the exhausted girls.

It was hours later when Marion suddenly sat bolt upright, coughing and rubbing her eyes.

"Kay! Kay!" The note of terror in her voice roused Kay, who struggled to a sitting position.

"What is it? I—" She broke off, coughing in her turn.

"Smoke!" Marion groped her way to the door, and, as she pulled it open, a thick wave of blackness seemed to roll in on them.

Gasping, they both ran out into the clearing, but here it was even worse. Through the darkness they could see flashes of flame through the trees to the east. Ominous crashes and cracklings filled the air, and the heat was suffocating.

"Flicker!" Kay cried in an agonized tone. "I've got to get him!" She started to run toward the north end of the clearing, but Marion grabbed her arm.

"Don't be crazy! He'll have broken loose and stampeded long ago! The west side is our only chance!"

She dropped Kay's arm, and made for the precipitous west slope, then drew back with a cry of terror, as she caught sight of a tree that suddenly burst into flame like a gigantic torch.

A second later there was an answering cry from down the western slope.

"Ted!" Shrieking the name together, the two girls ran to the brink of the sharp precipice that fell away from a rocky ledge, and peered into the blackness.

"Marion!" They could make out Ted's voice clearly now, and the note of bewilderment in it. "Let yourself

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down over the edge! I'll catch you as you slide."

Marion pushed Kay forward. "You first!" she commanded.

In the weird light of the blazing tree they could see Ted, thirty feet or more below, braced against the stump of a scrub spruce.

Before Kay could protest, Marion had forced her to her knees and shoved her over the edge. With utter lack of control, Kay tried to break her descent by catching on to any protruding shrubs or rocks. The fraction of a second later, though it seemed an eternity, she felt Ted's hand grasp her arm.

For a perilous moment they both swayed, and it seemed inevitable that they would crash on down together. But Ted pulled Kay onto the tiny projecting ledge, where he had secured a precarious foothold.

"Marion!" Kay gasped, pointing upward, and cutting short Ted's amazed exclamation as he discovered whom he held by the arm.

Thrusting Kay behind him, Ted steadied himself and called "Now! Marion! Quick!"

Kay clutched a projecting root with one hand and hung onto Ted with the other, in order to break the shock of the impact of Marion's body as he brought it to a sudden stop. A second later, and the three of them clung to the cliff, which was now lighted by a second tree that had caught.

"Follow me!"

Ted's voice rang out with the harshness of a military command.

Swinging around a projecting rock, he led the perilous way down, the two girls silently and breathlessly following in his exact footsteps.

One last drop, and they had reached the timbered slope. He grabbed one of their hands in each of his and raced down with them to the foot of the canyon. Without a word he helped them across the narrow stream in its depths. Then they pushed up the other side.

Not until they were well up on the further ridge did he pause. Then, with a broken "Thank God!" he pulled Kay into his arms.

CHAPTER XLIV

Sunrise

"TED! Ted! Where is Dad?" Marion demanded imperiously. With a gasp Kay pulled away, ashamed of the overmastering emotion that had made her forget everything but her own relief and happiness.

"Marion! Forgive me!" Ted swung around, still keeping one hand on Kay as though fearful that she might vanish, but putting a steadying touch on Marion's arm. "Seeing Kay here put everything else out of my head! Your father, Marion—" He paused helplessly, searching for words to break the news.

"I knew it!" Marion gave a pitiful cry and put her hand to her eyes. "You don't have to tell me! He's dead!"

In an instant Kay's arms were around her, and she turned inquiringly to Ted.

Ted nodded. "Yes, Marion; mercifully dead! That is the only way you can think of it."

In as few and as gentle words as possible, Ted told Marion of his finding of her father. Then, to give her time to get a grip on herself after the first shock of sorrow, he went on to describe his meeting with Josh Hastings and the subsequent events.

It was Kay's turn to shudder at the thought of the narrow escape Ted had had; but she did not waste any time on the past, as her mind flew to the immediate future.

"Where did you leave him?" she demanded. "We must get right back! He might die or escape or something!"

"He had a mean blow on the head, but I don't think he'll die," Ted answered, "and there's no chance of his escaping! He's well out of the fire line, with this shift of wind; but I doubt if he knows it. By the time we get back, I reckon he'll be ready to tell anything he knows, rather than be left behind."

"Come!" Marion turned and led the way up the slope. "Ted's future is the

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thing to think of now! Not my poor Dad. His troubles are over; and you're right! It is far better." Her voice broke with a sob, but she pushed bravely on, Ted and Kay on either side of her. "How did Josh Hastings ever happen to be there?" she asked finally, with a determined change of subject.

"Search me!" Ted began, but Kay interrupted.

"He must have been looking for Zeke Farley and his posse," she exclaimed. "Shorty said he'd gone out to join them."

"I reckon Zeke Farley's given up looking for me right now and has joined the fire-fighting gang," Ted observed. "Josh Hastings likely came to the same conclusion, and was on his way to find him."

He stopped as the slope became steeper, and saved his breath for the climb, leading the way as they fell into single file up the rocky ledge. The sky behind them was weirdly lighted with a lurid glare which permeated the darkness, spreading out in a pinkish glow over their heads.

After a good deal of desperately difficult scrambling, Ted paused to get his bearings.

"It must have been about here that I left that cayuse of mine. Wait a second." He left them and reappeared a few minutes later, leading his horse. "Now you can have easier going."

Motioning the two girls to get on, he led the way south along the crest of the ridge, and after a half-hour or so, stopped and gave a long "Whoopee!"

There was a faint answer in the distance.

"He's there, all right," Ted declared with relief in spite of his former confident assertion that Josh Hastings couldn't escape them.

Another ten minutes, and they came out on the ridge where Ted had left his would-be assassin. A string of oaths and imprecations greeted the three as they picked their way through the underbrush; but Ted cut Hastings peremptorily short.

"I've brought my witnesses," he announced curtly. The next minute they all came out on Josh Hastings, who peered up at the two girls with incredulous amazement.

"Where in hell—"

"Never mind that," Ted interrupted sharply. He pulled a notebook and pencil out of his pocket. "Now then; repeat what you said back there!"

Josh Hastings' mouth twisted. "I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, yes, you do!" Ted's eyes narrowed. "And unless you come across, I'll leave you here for the cremation you missed before."

From his place on the ground, bound hand and foot, Hastings struggled up to a sitting position. "So, you still want me to lie, to save your neck and put my own in the noose!" he sneered, with one eye on Kay to measure the effect of his words. "I'd rather take a chance on the fire!"

"I don't want any lies," Ted countered. "I want the truth about how you killed Scrap Johnson and framed me for it. And I'm going to get it!" He made a move toward his gun.

Josh Hastings gave a harsh laugh. "Go ahead and get it, then! *I'll* have witnesses to prove you got it by extortion!"

For a long moment the two men glared at each other, unconscious for the time being of anything but the desperate conflict of will between them. Then, Ted's hand dropped to his side.

"You're right about that," he agreed, "but I have a better weapon than a gun. I reckon I won't need your confession after all." He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the notebook Kay had given him. "I'll just quote you a few extracts from this diary that was found in the cellar of the blacksmith shop at Clear Water. I know it by heart."

"It's all lies!" Josh Hastings broke in hoarsely on Ted's recital. "It's a frame-up!"

"It is not!" Kay faced him with blazing eyes. "And I have another piece

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of evidence to prove you were on the spot."

"Moreover, I can testify that Ted Gaynor swore again and again in his delirium that he had seen you bending over him!" Marion added her voice to the chorus of accusation.

"Sure you can," Josh Hastings screamed in sudden frenzy, "and I can testify that you're all lying, lying, lying, do you hear? Oh!" He gave a groan and toppled back, moaning, "My head! My head!"

In a second, Marion was kneeling beside him, expertly bracing his head against her knee, while he muttered inarticulately.

"It looks like a stroke," she whispered to Ted. "Have you any water?"

Ted made for his saddle and pulled off the canteen. "A little; not much." He held it out to her.

Marion tried unsuccessfully to force some between Josh Hastings' teeth, and with a final moan, he slumped to the ground unconscious, breathing in heavy, stentorian gasps.

"It is a stroke." Marion rose to her feet. "He may come out of it, and he may not. What shall we do?"

"There's only one thing to do," Ted answered. "We'll have to take him with us to Clear Water. I'll give him and myself up there. We'll have to leave the decision of who's guilty up to the Red River jury."

Accepting Ted's decision as final, the two girls helped him lift Josh Hastings onto his horse.

"Across that third ridge," Ted announced, "we ought to strike the Clear Water Trail. Are you girls good for it?"

He looked inquiringly from Marion to Kay. Kay felt her heart contract as she caught the subtle change in his expression as his eyes shifted to her.

After the first wild moment of abandon, Ted had hardly addressed her, except in general conversation. And now all the warmth of that first passionate embrace had given way to a hard, cold impersonality.

As clearly as though he had spoken his thoughts aloud, Kay knew what was in his mind. She joined perfunctorily in Marion's assertion that they were ready for anything; but as Ted started off, leading his horse with his unconscious burden, Kay grabbed Marion's hand and held her back.

"Let me go ahead with Ted," she whispered, and, with an understanding nod, Marion made way for her to pass and dropped a few paces behind.

"Ted!"

Ted started at Kay's voice close beside him.

She slipped her fingers into his free hand, which hung loosely at his side, and clutched onto it convulsively, in spite of its lack of response to her clasp. "Ted! You must listen to me!" she began desperately. "I didn't tell Zeke Farley where you were! You must believe me! It wasn't until Shorty told me, after I got back, that I knew what Tom Runyon had testified at the trial!" In a few broken words she told of having seen him and Marion together; of her frantic race for home, and the fall from her horse.

"I was delirious when Tom Runyon found me, and for two days afterward," she ended. "I was mad with jealousy, Ted! Heaven knows what I said, but whatever it was, I wasn't responsible."

"Jealousy!" Ted ejaculated, a great happiness coming into his voice as he dropped his mount's bridle. Putting a hand on each arm, he held Kay off at arm's length and asked, "Why were you jealous?"

"Because I love you," Kay whispered, her head proudly high and her eyes on his, in spite of the wild beating of her heart.

The next instant she was in his arms, and all the bitterness of misunderstanding was cleared away in the blissful interval that followed.

A bewildered whinny before them and a soft laugh behind, brought them back to the present.

"That's all very well," Marion's voice broke in, "but don't you think we'd better be getting on?"

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With a happy laugh, Kay broke away from Ted. She stepped back beside Marion, while Ted ran ahead to catch up with his burdened mount.

Up and down they went, until at last the first streaks of dawn found them following the crest of the ridge along whose cliffs, fifty feet or more below them, the trail to Clear Water Basin wound. Suddenly Ted stopped and motioned them to be still. Below them, on the trail, they could hear horses' hoofs and voices. By listening intently, they managed to make out the words.

Kay grabbed Ted's arm convulsively, as she recognized the two voices that were speaking.

"Nothing to do now but let it burn itself out. If they hadn't sent for me to go and fight it at the other end, it would never have made this headway," Tom Runyon's boasting voice floated up to them.

"Maybe;" Zeke Farley was non-committal. He raised his voice as though calling back to someone. "After you've combed this west ridge, you two may as well follow on." There was an answering halloo and he dropped his voice again. "It's a hundred to one that the fire has taken on the job of avenging Scrap Johnson's murder. That Gaynor guy'll never get out of there alive, if you ask me."

Ted pulled Kay to him, and held her close. "Listen, sweetheart. I'm going to give myself up now, and turn Josh Hastings over to them."

"No, no!" Kay protested, but Ted kissed her remonstrance away.

"The sooner I'm free, the sooner we'll be together," he whispered. "Now that I know you love me, I'll put up a fight that will have to convince them of my innocence."

Kay glanced at Josh Hastings' unconscious figure. "If only we could make him confess!"

The voices below grew louder and nearer. After a last lingering kiss, Ted went over to the edge of the cliff and shouted, "Zeke Farley! I'm Ted Gaynor and ready to give myself up. I'll meet you a hundred yards ahead on the trail."

A confused and excited babel of voices rose from below. But without waiting for anything further, Ted hurried ahead to the spot where he saw that he could drop down to the trail. When Zeke Farley and his companions rounded a curve and came to the designated place, they stopped short with surprise at the sight of the extraordinary group waiting to receive them.

Stepping in front of the girls, Ted told his story. "I brought Josh Hastings along in the hopes he'd confess," he ended, "but I reckon I can convince a jury without him."

A groan from Josh Hastings brought all eyes to him, as a convulsive shudder shook his frame and tiny flecks of foam appeared at his lips.

"He's had another stroke!" Kay exclaimed. "Quick! Get him off!"

In a thrice they had lifted him to the ground, and, taking sudden imperious command of the situation, Kay motioned them all a few paces away. She was kneeling beside him as Josh Hastings' eyes opened.

"You're going to die, Josh Hastings," she declared solemnly, her eyes holding his with hypnotic intensity, "and Ruth will be left all alone. If you will tell the truth about Scrap Johnson's death, I swear that I'll take care of her."

Josh Hastings' eyes wandered from Kay to Zeke Farley and to Tom Runyon behind her. Then they rested on Ted, and a sullen triumph gleamed through their glazed terror.

"I won't talk!" he declared with sudden vindictive strength.

"Then Ruth must be alone in the world and fend for herself!" Kay's voice was inexorable and gave no quarter.

"Damn you! Have it your own way then!" His eyes clouded as a convulsive tremor shook him, and Kay beckoned Zeke Farley closer.

"Go on!"

"I killed Scrap Johnson because he pulled a dirty trick on me!" Josh Hastings gasped out his confession. "And I

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framed Gaynor because I hate him, and I intended to have him proved a murderer to you. And what's more, I burned your ranch house, because—" His face contracted in a horrible grimace, and he fell back.

Zeke Farley sprang to him, and put a hand on his heart. After a moment of breathless silence, he turned to Kay.

"You were just in time," he announced. "He's dead."

With an inarticulate cry, Kay rose to her feet and flung herself into Ted's arms.

Tom Runyon, who had been watching the whole dramatic scene from a distance, swung into his saddle. He silently pushed past the group on the trail, and, without a backward look, headed down for Clear Water Basin.

For a long moment his horse's hoofbeats were the only sounds to break the silence. With sudden brilliance, the first rays of the sun caught the tops of the peaks, announcing the arrival of a new day. To the southeast, a heavy cloud of smoke smothered the ridges, but above and ahead of them all was clear.

"That is the past and the future!" Marion spoke in an awed whisper, as she looked from the obscurity of the eastern ridges to the bright promise of the western peaks, towering above them.

Kay raised her head from Ted's shoulder, but before following Marion's look her eyes anxiously sought Zeke Farley.

He nodded a sympathetic assent to her unspoken question.

"He's free, all right!" He motioned his men to take Josh Hastings' body and go ahead. A grin of satisfaction spread over his face as Kay slipped her hand through Ted's arm and faced him with radiantly happy eyes.

"How about coming back with me?" he cocked a quizzical eye at Marion. "I'll send up a couple of cayuses for those two. I reckon they won't mind waiting!"

"I'd love to! I want to get back as soon as possible." Marion eagerly accepted his suggestion. Before Kay or Ted could remonstrate, she kissed her hand to them and sprang up before Zeke Farley.

A moment later, and they had followed the rest around a bend in the trail, leaving Kay and Ted alone with the sunrise.

"Sweetheart!" Ted held Kay away for a moment, as he gazed at the bright glory of her hair in the morning sunlight, that now included them in its golden glow, "Marion is right! The future is ours!"

He pulled her gently to him, and, for a breathless interval, future and past were forgotten in the magic of the present.

(The End)

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TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.
I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

(*Miss*)
(*Mrs.*)
Signed (*Mr.*) .....

Address .....

Three *successive* coupons make you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.
Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.
You must be a member to secure the pin.
Please *print* your name and address plainly.

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The Westerners'

DEFINITIONS

Across

1. Naked
5. Make believe
8. Understand
12. Branding tool
13. Not near
14. By spoken word
15. Pounces onto
16. Girl's name
17. Strip off the top
18. Beverage
19. Punches
20. Streets (Abbr.)
22. Compass point
24. Verdant place in the desert
28. Remainder of a fallen tree
32. Quickly
33. Enclosure
34. Not full
36. Breezy
37. Large reptile
39. Stomach; craw
42. Riding whip
43. Australian bird
46. Ages
48. Mineral
49. Gaiter
50. Western vegetation
51. Penchant
52. Coniferous tree
53. Aid
54. Ocean
55. High cards

Down

1. Ship belonging to Columbus
2. Russian mountain range
3. Building material (contr.)
4. Printer's measures
5. Burning
6. Deep depressions in the earth
7. Barter
8. Danger signals
9. Boats
10. Lure
11. American trees
21. Paint horse
23. Narrow board
24. Open (Poetic)
25. Limb
26. Dip in liquid
27. Pig pen
28. Plant
29. Vase
30. Angry
31. Part of rope
35. Party with refreshments
39. Plateau
40. An Oriental
41. Payment for labor
43. Narrative poem
44. Hair on a horse's neck
45. American Indian
47. Harden
49. Watering place

This puzzle, as you will note, has been prepared especially for readers of Western stories, being made up in a large part of terms having to do with life in the cattle country. Try your skill and see if you can solve it. Then check up on yourself by means of the solution which will appear in the next issue.

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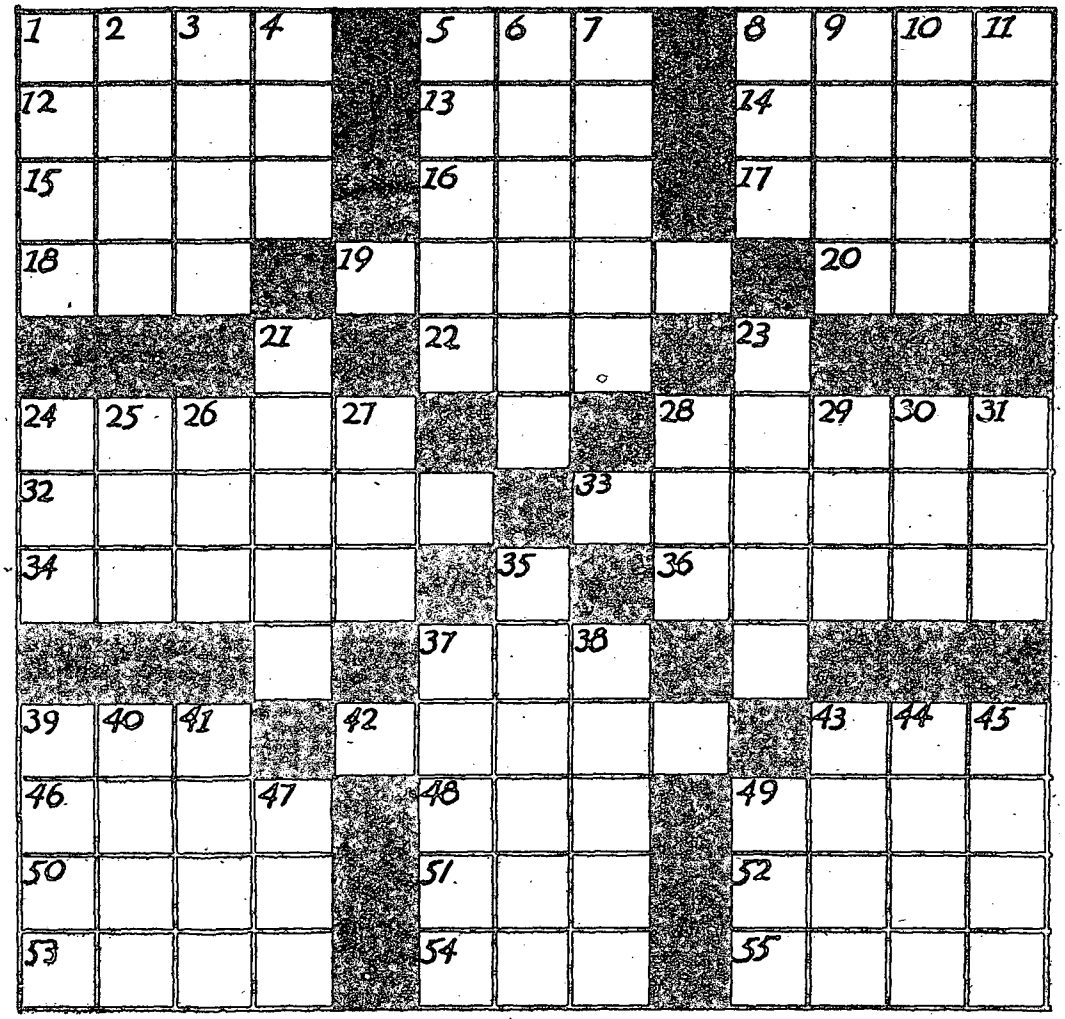
Crossword Puzzle . . .



Readers, do you like this idea of a Westerners' crossword puzzle? Would you like to see it become a permanent feature of Ranch Romances? We are planning to print one in each issue, and want to know whether you folks out there like these puzzles and think them a good idea.

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Some Fellow Members

The names of the members appear on page 80.

See Page 149 for

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of the Trail's End Club

The names of the members appear on page 80.

Trail's End Coupon.

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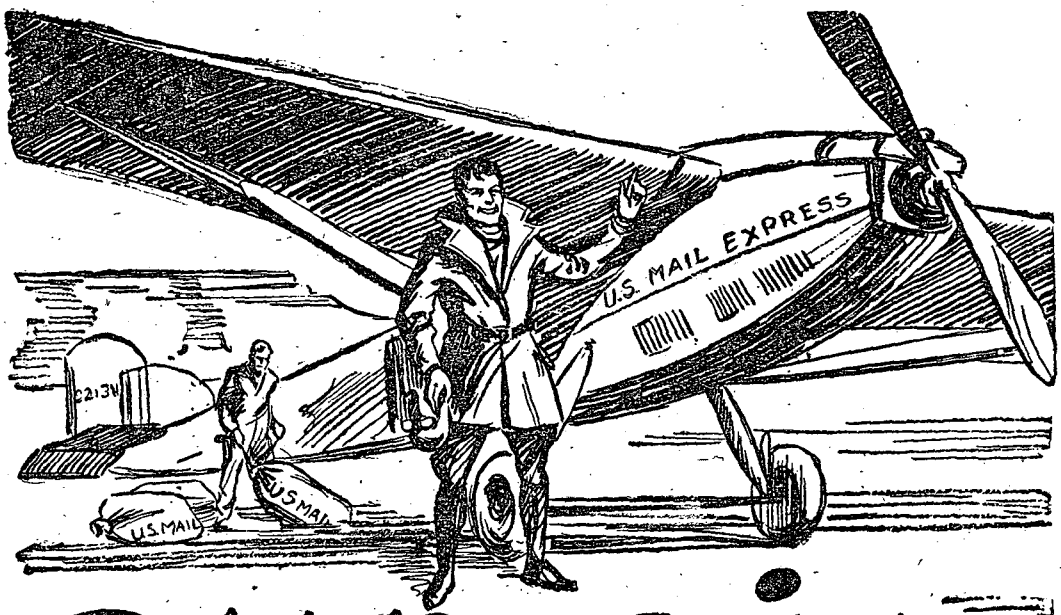

our air

OUR AIR MAIL is running daily between the editorial office of RANCH ROMANCES and its readers throughout the world. RANCH ROMANCES is not published for anyone but the reader, and we want you to look upon this magazine as something distinctly your own. Write and tell us exactly the kind of story that you think ought to go into it. And we want to help make friends for our readers. We want to help you to know friends who are thousands of miles away, or within a stone's throw of your own town. OUR AIR MAIL will be glad to forward and exchange letters. The Editor reserves the right to read and turn over to the Postal Authorities, if necessary, anything that is not in keeping with the clean, outdoor spirit of RANCH ROMANCES. Be sure to enclose postage for letters sent by OUR AIR MAIL. Moreover, this department is intended only for readers who actually wish correspondents. Henceforth, each letter must bear the written signature of the writer, and anyone fraudulently signing someone else's name will be investigated.

LIKES DIVERSION

Dear Editor:

I am a lonesome R. R. reader who is longing for pen pals. I would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world.

I am interested in music, dancing, story writing, and writing letters. I will gladly exchange snapshots with everyone.

I am seventeen years old, five feet tall, have brown hair, and brown eyes.

Wishing R. R. heaps of success, I am

Sincerely,

CATHERINE ADAMS.

136 Broad St.,
Stamford, Conn.

A LOVER OF ANIMALS

Dear Editor:

After reading Ranch Romances for many months now, I have at last plucked up enough courage to send in a plea for pen pals. I do hope you will put this plea in print, although this is my first attempt to crash the gates.

I am twenty years of age, five feet seven inches tall, have brown wavy hair and gray eyes.

I am fond of all sports, especially swimming and tennis. I am also a lover of animals.

I promise to answer every letter received.

With all good wishes to the best magazine going, I am

Yours sincerely,

IRA SHEPHERD.

c/o P. O. Box 154,
Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia.

FLORA IS ATHLETIC

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to crash the gates of "Our Air Mail." I do hope to see this letter in a forthcoming issue of R. R. Speaking of R. R., I think the stories are marvelous.

I am seventeen years old, have auburn curly hair, blue-green eyes, am tall and slender. I am fond of all sports, but basketball and swimming are among my favorites.

My hobbies are corresponding and stamp collecting. I find both very interesting.

I promise to answer every letter received, and will also exchange snapshots.

FLORA REID.

131 So. Prospect St.,
Ypsilanti, Mich.

SONGS AND POEMS

Dear Editor:

I am a boy of nineteen, have brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. I am six feet tall. I would like to hear from all the young folks who are interested in songs and poems. I have Western, love, and mountain songs—most of them being Western. I also have snapshots to exchange.

Come on, everybody, write. I faithfully promise to answer all letters received.

Yours truly,

ORVILLE LOWE.

Gen. Del.,
Bartlesville, Okla.

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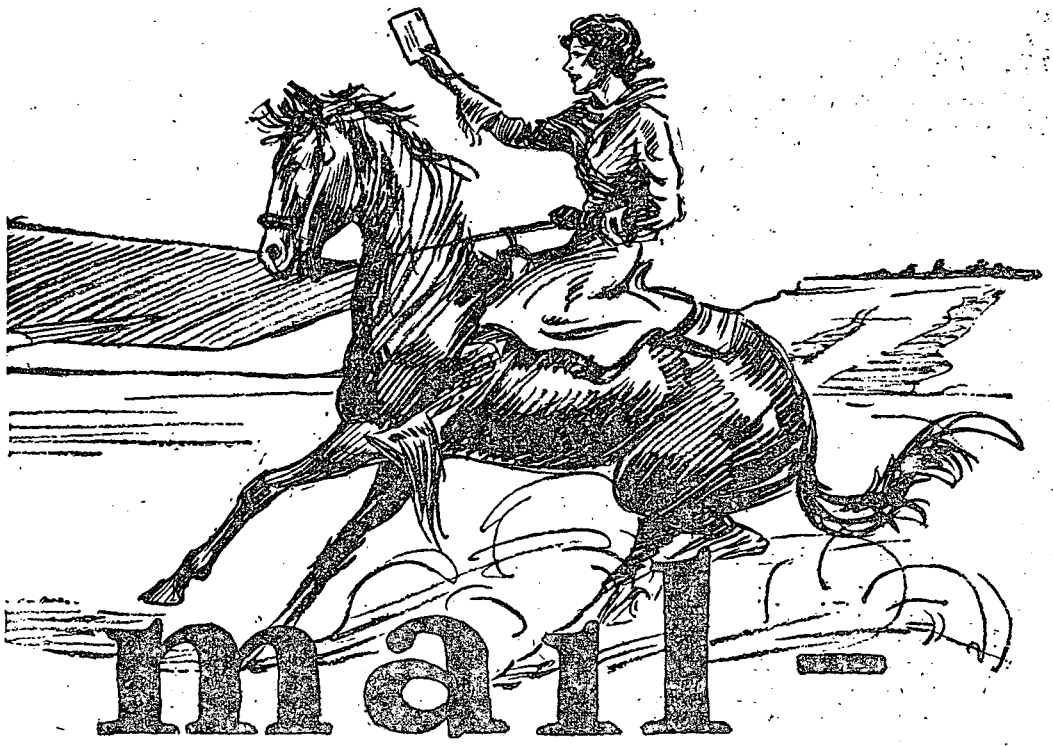

A GIFT FROM PANAMA

Dear Editor:

I've been reading Ranch Romances for quite a while now, and I would like to make friends through "Our Air Mail."

I am five feet eleven inches tall, have dark curly hair, brown eyes, and am not bad looking.

I have been in the navy for six years, and can tell some interesting stories about China and the Far East. I was stationed there for four years.

The first girl who answers this letter will get a nice little gift from Panama. We just came up from Panama a week ago, and I have a gift that I think would make any girl happy. So let's go, girls, get your pens and pencils working. Snaps exchanged, if desired.

Sincerely,
DAN CALEGERO.

U. S. S. Portland,
c/o Postmaster,
New York.

LONELY FELLOW

Dear Editor:

I am another lonely fellow who would like to have pen pals. I am Irish, have blue eyes, curly hair, and am five feet four inches tall.

I promise to answer every letter received.

More anon.

Wishing Ranch Romances every success, I am
Yours truly,
WILLIAM McSERLEY.

Box 372,
East Douglas, Mass.

FIRST FIFTY

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of Ranch Romances, and enjoy the stories very much.

I would like to hear from pen pals in Hawaii, South America, Spain; in fact, pals from every corner of the globe.

I have black hair, blue eyes, and am eighteen. I am very fond of art, and a picture awaits the first fifty who write.

Here's wishing R. R. the best of luck.
ELLIS SMITH.

Doll St.,
Maryville, Tenn.

TALL AND SLIM

Dear Editor:

I have just finished my second copy of your splendid magazine, Ranch Romances, and I certainly am convinced that it cannot be beat.

I am seventeen years of age, have brown hair and blue eyes, and am tall and slim. I would like to hear from pen pals all over the world, around my own age.

Wishing the Double R everlasting success, I am
Sincerely yours,
CHARLES KERAGA.

R. D. 4,
Meshoppen, Pa.

SOUVENIRS FROM CANADA

Dear Editor:

Have you a little space left in "Our Ail Mail" for a lonesome northern girl? I am nineteen, have medium-brown wavy hair, green-gray eyes, fair complexion, and am five feet three inches tall. I am fond of all outdoor sports, but skating and horseback riding are my favorites.

Will exchange snaps with everyone. The first five who write will receive an extra souvenir from Canada. I promise to answer all letters.

A staunch reader of Ranch Romances.
"SUNSHINE."

Mary Cann,
Box 305,
Flin Flon, Man., Can.

"ONE-FRIEND GIRL"

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of twenty-two; am a blonde, five feet tall.

I am fond of music, reading, and am also an animal and home lover. I'm essentially a "one-friend girl," and would prefer to hear only from someone with similar views, and genuinely seeking, like myself, a loyal pen friend.

I would especially like to hear from someone either in the army or navy, as I have a great admiration for the service.

Best wishes to Ranch Romances, which has passed many pleasant hours for me with its thrilling, clean stories.

Yours sincerely,
(MISS) ROSS.

c/o G. P. O.,
Dumbarton, Scotland.

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FROM THE WEST

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of sixteen, have blond hair and gray eyes. I would like to have pen pals from all over the world, but would especially like to have some pals from the West.

I promise to answer every letter received, and will also exchange snapshots.

Sincerely,
NELLIE HUFFLING.

115 E. McCulooch St.,
Greensboro, N. C.

IONE IS LONELY

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of Ranch Romances for quite some time, and enjoy it above all other magazines.

I am a lonely girl from South Dakota who lives on a farm within forty-five miles of the Game Lodge where Coolidge spent his vacation in 1927.

I am eighteen, have brown hair, and gray eyes. Would like to hear from boys and girls all over the U. S. and Canada.

Sincerely,
IONE HANSELMAN.

Box Elder, So. Dark.

COWS—CATTLE—SHEEP

Dear Editor:

I would like to have some pen pals. I am twenty-two years old, and work on my father's farm. We have dairy cows, run cattle and sheep, and our farm is about forty miles north of Auckland—New Zealand's largest city.

I would like to hear from members of the opposite sex from eighteen to twenty-two.

Trusting that this letter will find its way into "Our Air Mail," and wishing the R. R. Kia Ora, I am,
RONALD S. PHILLIPS.

Wharepapa, Kaipara Line,
North Auckland, N. Z.

MOVIE AND RADIO FAN

Dear Editor:

More power to Ranch Romances. It has the cleanest stories I've ever read, and they are invigorating after some of the modern fiction.

Here's hoping I get some pen pals through "Our Air Mail" department.

I'm just an ordinary fun-loving girl of eighteen, have dark red-brown hair and hazel eyes.

I like to attend any athletic games, such as football, basketball or baseball. I enjoy reading, and hiking and am also a movie and radio fan.

JEANE.

Jeane Ellis,
c/o D. H. Franklin,
North Bend, Wash.

BETWEEN 19 AND 25

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to get into "Our Air Mail." I enjoy Ranch Romances, and wish it much success.

I am nineteen, five feet three inches tall, have gray eyes, and brown hair.

So, come on, boys and girls from Arizona, Utah, Nevada; and sailors along the Pacific, write to a lonesome girl. I would like to hear from those between nineteen and twenty-five.

EDNA KEEN.

Rte. 4,
Emporia, Kans.

LONELY C. C. C. BOYS

Dear Editor:

We are two lonely C. C. C. boys from Chicago, stationed at Guler, Washington, in the heart of the Columbia National Forest.

We have been reading Ranch Romances for the past four months, and think the magazine deserves an A-1 rating as far as literary clean fiction is concerned.

Stanley is twenty-one, five feet seven inches, has brown hair and blue eyes. I, Lou, have sandy hair, blue eyes, five feet nine inches, and am twenty-two years old.

We would like to hear from pen pals from all over the world, especially from lonely blondes and brunettes.

Come on, boys and girls, cheer up the lonely C. C. C.

Yours,
STANLEY J. SWALEK,
LOUIS F. JANOWSKI.

Company 604—C. C. C.,
Little Goose Camp,
Guler, Wash.

AN ENGLISH LASSIE

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt to try for pen pals. I am a lonely Devonshire girl, have light wavy hair, green-gray eyes, fair complexion, and am considered attractive.

Will answer all letters received, and will exchange snapshots.

Wishing Ranch Romances every success, I am

Yours truly,
CYNTHIA JOSLIN.

Canberra Briar Rd.,
Hartley Plymouth,
Devon, Eng.

EASTERN CIRCUS TROUPERS

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances for two years, and find it excellent.

I would like to hear from girls between twenty-eight and thirty-one. I am twenty-nine years old, have medium brown hair, hazel eyes, and a fair complexion.

Let's hear from you eastern circus troupers.

Yours truly,
ANNA PAROBECK.

134½ Arlington St.,
San Francisco, Calif.

OPPORTUNITY FOR WESTERNERS

Dear Editor:

Have been reading Ranch Romances for quite some time, and enjoy it immensely.

I am twenty-five years old and would appreciate having my mail box filled. Although I am from a large city, I must confess that I am often lonely. I am easy to please, and almost any subject interests me, so I should have lots of pen pals.

My greatest wish is to hear from Westerners of either sex, also service men, as well as people from all over the globe.

Best wishes to R. R.

Yours truly,
MARIE KLUGE.

3130 Boudinot St.,
Philadelphia, Pa.

SERVICE MEN AND COWBOYS

Dear Editor:

We have read Ranch Romances for a number of years, and sure do get a thrill out of Robert Dale Denver's stories.

Here's a plea to pen pals. Frances is eighteen years old, has blond hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion. I, Maria, am seventeen have blond hair, brown eyes, and a tan complexion. We are fond of all sports, especially dancing.

Let's hear from the soldiers, sailors and cowboys.

We are,
FRANCES BROWN,
MARIA CHISOLM.

2113 Vinton Ave.,
Memphis, Tenn.

A NEW ZEALAND MISS

Dear Editor:

Ranch Romances is one magazine that I never tire of. The stories are very interesting, and written by top-notch authors.

I am fifteen, have brown hair and eyes, and I'm interested in most everything. I would like to hear from pen friends all over the world, especially Americans.

I promise to be a regular correspondent; so please, won't someone write?

Wishing Ranch Romances lots of luck, I am,
NANCY VAUGHAN.

3 Eldon Rd.,
Balmoral, Auckland, S. I.,
New Zealand.

A NEWCOMER

Dear Editor:

I am a newcomer and was introduced to your magazine by a friend. I have purchased only two copies of Ranch Romances and you may be sure that I will be a regular reader.

I think "Our Air Mail" department a very fine idea. I would like to hear from boys and girls everywhere. I am twenty-two, have dark brown hair and eyes, and am five feet six inches tall.

I promise to answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots.

Here's hoping.

Yours sincerely,
HELEN CLAPPER.

Lanesboro, Pa.

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TO A FUTURE CHAMPION

Dear Editor:

Ranch Romances is by far the most popular magazine on this ship. Upon inspection, you will find one copy in every locker. Need more be said to prove the popularity of the Double R?

I am an electrician in the fireman's gang aboard the Aircraft Carrier, Lexington. I am five feet ten, have dark curly hair and brown eyes. My favorite sport is boxing, and I have high hopes of winning the middleweight belt for the Aircraft Scouting Force this year.

I would like any number of pen pals. I will send a snapshot in fighting togs to the first five.

"KID" GOLDSMITH.

U. S. S. Lexington,
c/o P. M. (E-6 Div.)
San Pedro, Cal.

LET'S GET ACQUAINTED

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of R. R. for the last three years, and always enjoy the wholesome, outdoor stories.

I am eighteen, five feet five inches, have brown curly hair, and brown eyes. My favorite sports are tennis, hiking and dancing. My hobbies are collecting stamps, pictures, and letters from all over the world.

I promise to answer all letters received, and will exchange snaps, souvenirs, etc. Let's get acquainted!

Wishing Ranch Romances much success through the coming years, I am

Sincerely,
ANNE JONES.

Rte. 4,
Marietta, Ga.

GIVE POLLYANNA A CHANCE

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely girl, and have lots of time to write to pen pals. I have never traveled much, but would like to hear from those who have.

I have brown hair, hazel eyes, and am five feet three and one-half inches tall. I am a high school graduate. I like to read, roller skate, hike, etc.

My friends tell me I have a sense of humor, and a gift for making friends. So, come on, pals, give me a chance to use that gift.

Hopefully,
POLLYANNA.

Pollyanna Overland,
Box 53,
Lisbon, N. D.

SURPRISES AND SURPRISES!

Dear Editor:

Hurrah for Ranch Romances! It's the best magazine I've read for ages, and I don't mean maybe.

I wonder if I could secure some honest-to-goodness pen pals? I'm wild about writing letters, so come on, you cowboys and cowgirls, write.

I've gray-brown eyes, brown hair; am tall and sweet sixteen.

Now for some action! For the first ten letters I get from cowboys I will send a surprise; for the longest, I'll send a reward; for the most unusual, I'll send a premium. Everybody get out your paper, pen and ink, pencils, and write.

Everyone is welcome to write and get a surprise. So, come on, folks, and write. I dare yuh!

EDITH HOWELL.

Rte. 1, Box 56,
Farmington, Wash.

HERE'S HOPING

Dear Editor:

This is our first attempt to break into your group, "Our Air Mail." Here's hoping we are successful.

It seems to be the custom to tell one's age, so we'll comply with this. One of us, a blonde, is seventeen, and the other, a brunette, is fifteen.

Letters from everyone, preferably boys from fifteen to twenty, will be greatly appreciated.

Come on, everyone, drop us a line. We'll answer you all.

We wish the best of luck to Ranch Romances.

Sincerely,
ELSIE SWAN,
FLORENCE HAPEMAN,

Box 24,
Whidby Island,
Clinton, Wash.

WRITE TO AN ENGLISHMAN

Dear Editor:

I am a regular reader of Ranch Romances, but I have one complaint to make, and that is that over here we have to wait too long for copies of the magazine.

I am an engineer of twenty-five, am fond of all sports and very anxious to swap letters with the readers of R. R.

So, get busy fellow readers, and write to an Englishman who wants plenty of pen pals—the more, the merrier.

Give us more stories by J. Edward Leithead and R. Craig Christensen.

Sincerely yours,
LEONARD H. PARKINS.

13 Sutton Court Rd.,
Plaistow, London E. 13, Eng.

S. O. S. FOR PEN PALS

Dear Editor:

I have been a loyal reader of R. R. for some time and always look forward to forthcoming issues of the magazine.

Since "Our Air Mail" is quite a popular department, please be kind enough to let me crash the gates. I'll answer all letters that come my way.

I'm a radio operator, and this is my S. O. S. for friends on any wave length. I've been to lots of strange places and have a good supply of interesting stories to tell. Get busy and write, folks, before I forget them.

Trusting to my luck and everyone's kindness, I am

Most sincerely,
PVT. EDWARD A. BELL.

11th Signal Co.,
Schofield Barracks,
Oahu, T. H.

INK SPECIALISTS WANTED!

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely soldier, who would like to have a few pen pals.

I have been reading the Double R for about six years, and in my estimation there isn't another magazine that equals it.

I am nineteen, have brown hair, brown eyes, and am five feet eleven inches tall.

I have traveled quite a bit, and can tell many interesting things about my travels.

Come on, you ink specialists and write to a lonely soldier, who promises to answer all letters received.

Sincerely yours,
"HAPPY JACK."

Jack W. Layton,
Co. "F," 2nd Engineers,
Fort Logan, Colo.

BOTH TWENTY-ONE

Dear Editor:

We have been reading Ranch Romances for a good many years, and enjoy it immensely.

We are just two young people, both twenty-one years of age, who enjoy anything that is considered good, clean sport.

Frederic is six feet tall, and has light brown hair. I, Margie, am five feet three inches, and have medium brown hair and gray eyes.

It would make us very happy to hear from anyone who enjoys Ranch Romances as much as we do. Will answer all letters, and exchange snapshots.

Truly pen pals,
MARGIE H. SWAIDNER,
FREDERIC JOHNSON.

712 Columbia Ave.,
Ft. Wayne, Ind.

A FRENCH-IRISH AMERICAN

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of your magazine for some time, and if the people who read your magazine come up to the high standard of your wonderful book, well, I'd take great pride in getting acquainted.

I am a French-Irish American, have dark wavy hair, and large brown eyes. Am five feet eight inches tall and work for the government. I like to spend my spare time writing letters and making friends. So, come on, folks, cheer up an old grouch.

Wishing Ranch Romances oodles of popularity, I am,
PATRICK DE MAR.

932 K St., N. W.,
Washington, D. C.

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THE ONE AND ONLY

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your magazine for over two years, and I can honestly say that Ranch Romances is the one and only magazine as far as I am concerned. Lately I have become greatly interested in "Our Air Mail," and I wonder if you could help me find a pen pal.

I am a soldier stationed in Hawaii, am twenty years old, five feet eight inches tall, have dark brown hair and hazel eyes. I have plenty of time to answer letters, and can assure all who answer this plea an early reply.

A satisfied reader.

GEORGE B. STANLEY.

Box 174,
Schofield Barracks,
Honolulu, T. H.

EVERYONE IS WELCOME

Dear Editor:

Won't some of the pals move over a little and make room for a lonesome reader who is cravin' for pen pals? I would especially like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls, but everyone is welcome!

I am nineteen, have red-brown hair, blue-gray eyes, and am five feet four inches tall.

I will do my best to answer every letter received.

Sincerely,

FERN MONTGOMERY.

Rte. 1, Box 218,
Parlier, Calif.

A LITTLE SPACE FOUND

Dear Editor:

Won't you please find a little room for my letter? I am a constant reader of R. R. and think it is the best magazine printed.

I am seventeen years of age, have light red hair and blue eyes. Would like to hear from pals all over the world. Will exchange snaps with those who care to write.

Here's wishing Ranch Romances success.

PAULINE WITTWER.

32 Bogert St.
Totowa Boro,
Paterson, N. J.

NEITHER FAIR NOR DARK

Dear Editor:

I think Ranch Romances is a wonderful magazine. The stories all seem so true to life.

I am sixteen years old, have brown eyes, am five feet four inches, and am neither fair nor dark. I would especially like to hear from cowboys living on ranches. I would appreciate hearing from pen pals from all over the world, and to those who write, I will in turn describe the country in which I live.

Wishing Ranch Romances the best of luck, I am,

Yours sincerely,

"SMITTY."

Lawrence Smith,
c/o R. Dodge,
Sperling, B. C., Can.

DOUBLE R CAMPAIGNER

Dear Editor:

Ranch Romances is the best magazine published, famous for the clean stories contained therein.

Would like to receive a few letters from those who would care to write interesting letters. I would especially like to hear from folks from the Western States.

As for my personal appearance—why, I'm only a gray-eyed blonde, free, white, and twenty.

Always a Double R campaigner.

ROSALIE E. GREENE.

Rte. 3,
Lancaster, N. H.

A REGULAR READER

Dear Editor:

I am a regular reader of Ranch Romances, and like the stories very much.

I wonder if you would publish my plea for pen pals. I am a girl of twenty-two, have dark brown hair and eyes. I am very anxious to have pals from all parts of the world—boys, girls, men or women—it doesn't make any difference.

I promise to answer all letters.

"JONESEY."

Mary Jones,
450 Line St.,
Easton, Pa.

FUN AND TRICKS

Dear Editor:

May my plea be published? I want a pen pal who lives in the States, or anywhere.

I am sixteen, have black wavy hair, brown eyes, and a ready smile for everybody. Am considered by my friends to be full of fun and tricks. I like swimming, gymnastics, etc., but I am especially keen on dancing.

Here in Scotland I can't get the consecutive copies, but when I am able to get the magazine I read it with great enjoyment.

Long live the Double R.

JESSIE SIMPSON.

1012 Dumbarton Rd.,
Scotstown, Glasgow, W. 9,
Scotland.

"GAY" IS STRANDED

Dear Editor:

Will you all write to a slim little miss of twenty-two who is in a strange town—Salinas—and who needs plenty of pen pals?

I am very fond of outdoor sports, dancing, poetry, and I especially like Ranch Romances.

Come on, pen pals, find out what I look like. I promise snapshots and interesting letters to all who write to a stranded girl.

"GAY."

Anna Margaret Duncan,
364 Main St.,
Salinas, Calif.

SNAPSHOTS AND POSTCARDS

Dear Editor:

Won't you please help me find some pen pals? I am twenty years of age, and have dark brown hair and eyes. I would like to hear from pen pals from foreign countries, if possible.

I am interested in aviation, like rowing, motoring, etc. Will exchange snapshots and postcards with the first twenty-five who write.

Come on, boys and girls, from seventeen to thirty, pick up your pens and write me a few lines.

Wishing the Double R much success, I am,

Sincerely,

MORTON GORDON ADLER.

5385 St. Dominique St.,
Montreal, Que., Can.

LONELY SAILOR

Dear Editor:

Have been reading R. R. for five years, and sincerely hope you'll put my plea in "Our Air Mail" section.

I am a lonely sailor serving in Uncle Sam's Navy. I am twenty-three years old, and am 6 ft. tall.

I am fond of all sports, and would like to hear from everyone, everywhere.

Most sincerely,

GEORGE D. BUCANON.

U. S. S. Upshur No. 144.
Mare Island, Cal.

STORIES TIP-TOP

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances for a long time, and have always found the stories tip-top.

I am just a carefree school girl of sixteen who has plenty of time to write. I have brown curly hair, brown eyes, and am five ft. five in. tall.

I should like to hear from girls and boys between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one. I would especially like to hear from sailors. However, all letters are welcome, and will be answered promptly.

RUTH WALDRIP.

1201 Milam St.,
Texarkana, Tex.

SNAPSHOTS OF DETROIT

Dear Editor:

I am a steady reader of Ranch Romances, and think it an A-1 magazine.

I would like to hear from boys and girls everywhere. I am sixteen, and am five ft. four in. tall. I like both outdoor and indoor sports.

I would like to receive letters from the great open spaces, and from foreign countries. I'll be glad to send some interesting snapshots of Detroit to those who will be interested.

Wishing Ranch Romances everlasting success, I am,

JOE VERBAL.

17179 Caldwell St.,
Detroit, Mich.

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

BY PROFESSOR MARCUS MARI

NOVEMBER

SCORPIO

SCORPIO governs until November twenty-first. These people are positive, possess keen perception, logical minds, and fine intuitions.

They have a strong tendency to criticize and to domineer, but when they learn to temper this tendency with consideration for others, they become a splendid help to weaker people. They are capable of becoming champions of the cause of the oppressed. When they are convinced that a cause is just, the fearlessness and eloquence of their speech often attract widespread attention and achieve remarkable results.

Scorpio people have difficulty in controlling their jealousy, because they are quick to doubt and permit suspicions to dominate them. They dislike criticism, but are quick to see and comment upon the faults and weaknesses of others.

Scorpio women are excellent entertainers and have an unusual fund of humor. They have fine taste and tact in their choice of language, and are courteous and affable. The men have commercial insight, possess keen appreciation of values, and do well in real estate, politics and in scientific work.

In marriage they should find happiness in the signs of Libra and Cancer.

Professor Marcus Mari will give a personal reading to any reader who wishes to fill out the coupon.

Name..... Sex.....

Address.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date.....

Always use this coupon and enclose stamped envelope. 11-10-33

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Banish Fear
Prevent Disease
End Self Denial

KNOW THE AMAZING TRUTH ABOUT SEX AND LOVE!

Stop Worrying
Conquer Ignorance
Overcome Shame

The Forbidden Secrets of Sex are Daringly Revealed!

AWAY with false modesty! At last a famous doctor has told *all* the secrets of sex in frank, daring language. No prudish beating about the bush, no veiled hints, but TRUTH, blazing through 576 pages of straightforward facts.

Love is the most *magnificent ecstacy* in the world . . . know how to hold your loved one . . . don't glean half-truths from unreliable sources . . . let Dr. H. H. Rubin tell you *what to do* and *how to do it.*

MORE THAN 100 VIVID PICTURES

The 106 illustrations leave nothing to the imagination . . . know how to overcome physical mismating . . . know what to do on your wedding night to avoid the torturing results of ignorance.

Everything pertaining to sex is discussed in daring language. All the things you have wanted to know about your sex life, information about which other books only vaguely hint, is yours at last.

Some will be offended by the amazing frankness of this book and its vivid illustrations, but the world has no longer any use for prudery and false modesty.

A FAMOUS JUDGE SAYS THAT MOST DIVORCES ARE CAUSED BY SEX IGNORANCE!

Normal, sex-suited young people are torn apart because they lack sex knowledge.

WHAT EVERY MAN SHOULD KNOW

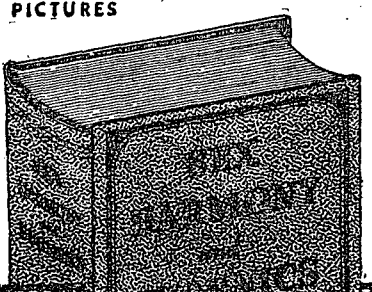
The Sexual Embrace
Secrets of the Honeymoon
Mistakes of Early Marriage
Homosexuality
Venereal Diseases
How to Regain Virility
Sexual Starvation
Glands and Sex Instinct
To Gain Greater Delight
The Truth About Abuse

WHAT EVERY WOMAN SHOULD KNOW

Joys of Perfect Mating
What to Allow a Lover to do
Intimate Feminine Hygiene
Prostitution
Birth Control Chart
How to Attract and Hold Men
Sexual Slavery of Women
Essentials of Happy Marriage
The Sex Organs

Knowledge is the basis of the perfect, satisfying love-life. Step out of the darkness into the sunlight . . . end ignorance, fear and danger today! Money back at once if you are not completely satisfied!

576 DARING PAGES
106 VIVID PICTURES



Don't be a *slave* to ignorance and fear. Enjoy the rapturous delights of the perfect physical love!

Lost love . . . scandal . . . divorce . . . can often be prevented by knowledge. Only the ignorant pay the *awful penalties* of wrong sex practices. Read the facts, clearly startlingly told . . . study these illustrations and grope in darkness no longer!

You want to know . . . and you should know *everything* about sex. Sex is no longer a sin . . . a mystery . . . it is your great power for happiness. You owe it to yourself . . . to the one you love, to tear aside the curtain of hypocrisy and learn the *naked truth*.

ATTRACT THE OPPOSITE SEX

Know *how to enjoy* the thrilling experiences that are your birthright . . . know how to attract the opposite sex . . . how to hold love.

There is no longer any need to pay the *awful price* for one moment of bliss. Read the scientific pathological facts told so bravely by Dr. Rubin. The chapters on venereal disease are alone worth the price of the book.

IS SEX IGNORANCE DRIVING THE ONE YOU LOVE INTO THE ARMS OF ANOTHER?

Let "Sex Harmony" teach you how easy it is to win and hold your loved one!

SEND NO MONEY—MAIL COUPON TODAY — THIS BOOK NOT SOLD TO MINORS

PIONEER PUBLISHING CO.
Dept. 1179 1270 Sixth Ave., New York, N. Y.

Please send me, "Sex Harmony and Eugenics" in plain wrapper. I will pay the postman $2.98 (plus postage) on delivery. If I am not completely satisfied, I can return the book and the entire purchase price will be refunded immediately. Also send me, FREE OF CHARGE, your book on "Why Birth Control?"

Name _____ Age ____

Address _____

Orders from Foreign Countries $3.45 in advance

FORMERLY $5
NOW ONLY $2.98

FREE!

NEW BOOK "WHY BIRTH CONTROL?"

This startling book discusses *birth control in an entirely new way*—Tells you many things about a much discussed subject. "Why Birth Control?"—will be a revelation to you—Sent free to all those who order "Sex Harmony and Eugenics" at the reduced price $2.98.

PIONEER PUBLISHING CO.
Radio City
1270 Sixth Ave., New York, N.Y.

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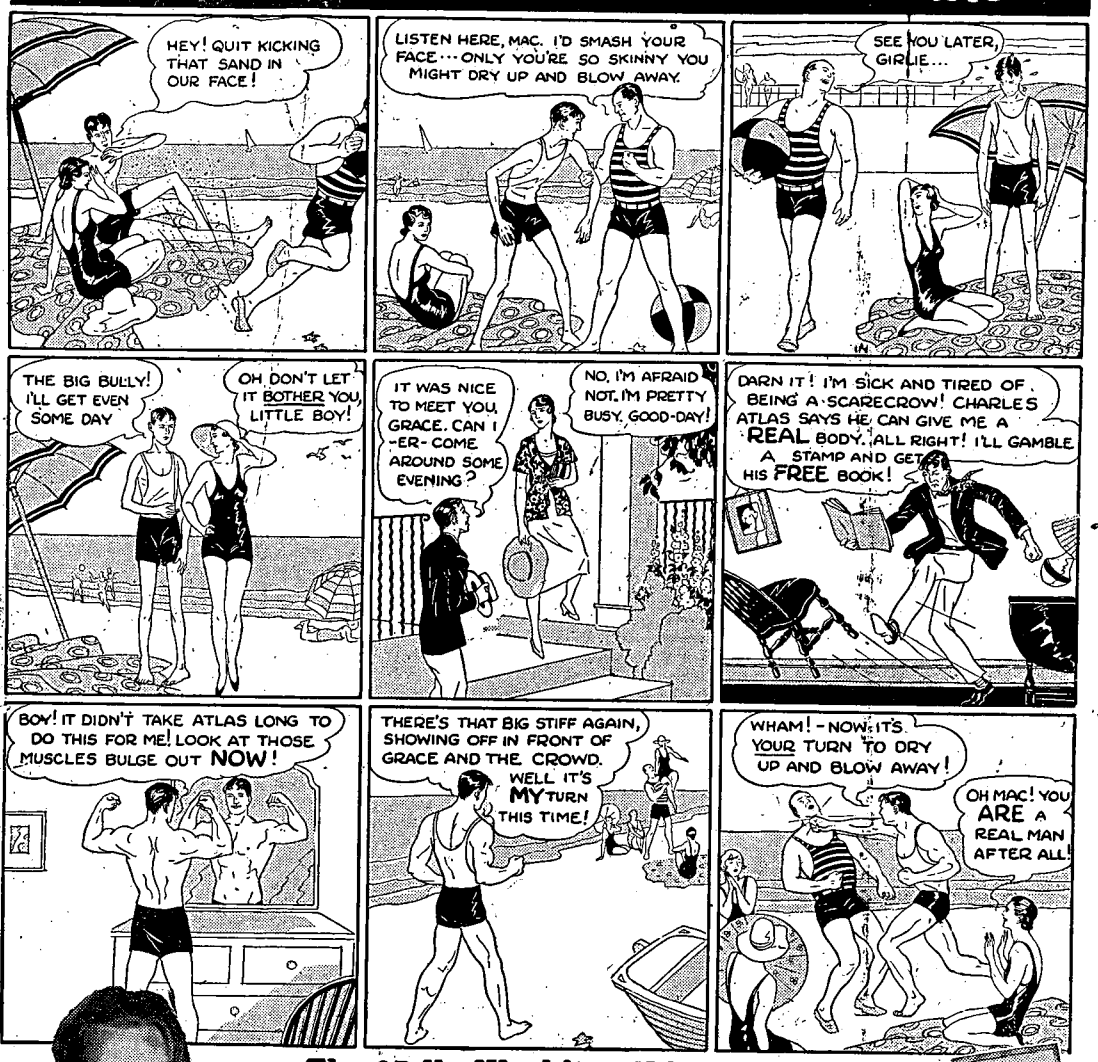
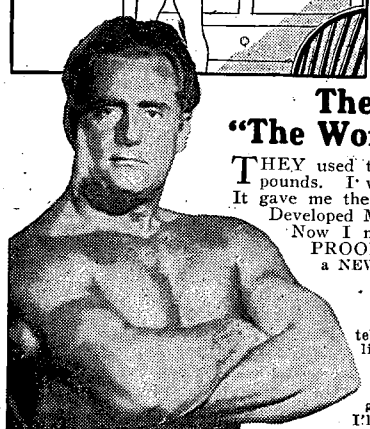
THE INSULT THAT MADE A MAN OUT OF "MAC"


HEY! QUIT KICKING THAT SAND IN OUR FACE!
LISTEN HERE, MAC. I'D SMASH YOUR FACE··· ONLY YOU'RE SO SKINNY YOU MIGHT DRY UP AND BLOW AWAY.
SEE YOU LATER, GIRLIE...
THE BIG BULLY! I'LL GET EVEN SOME DAY
OH DON'T LET IT BOTHER YOU, LITTLE BOY!
IT WAS NICE TO MEET YOU, GRACE. CAN I -ER- COME AROUND SOME EVENING?
NO, I'M AFRAID NOT. I'M PRETTY BUSY, GOOD-DAY!
DARN IT! I'M SICK AND TIRED OF BEING A SCARECROW! CHARLES ATLAS SAYS HE CAN GIVE ME A REAL BODY. ALL RIGHT! I'LL GAMBLE A STAMP AND GET HIS FREE BOOK!
BOY! IT DIDN'T TAKE ATLAS LONG TO DO THIS FOR ME! LOOK AT THOSE MUSCLES BULGE OUT NOW!
THERE'S THAT BIG STIFF AGAIN, SHOWING OFF IN FRONT OF GRACE AND THE CROWD. WELL IT'S MY TURN THIS TIME!
WHAM! - NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO DRY UP AND BLOW AWAY!
OH MAC! YOU ARE A REAL MAN AFTER ALL!



The 97-lb. Weakling Who Became "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

THEY used to think there wasn't much hope for me. I weighed only 97 pounds. I was a sickly scare-crow. Then I discovered *Dynamic-Tension*. It gave me the body that twice won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

Now I make you this amazing offer. *At my own risk* I'll give you PROOF *in just 7 days* that my same method can make you over into a NEW MAN of giant power and energy.

I'll PROVE You Can Have a Body Like Mine!

No "ifs"—"ands"—or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, steel-like muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girl, the best jobs? *Give me just 7 days!* I'll PROVE that *Dynamic-Tension*—without any pills or unnatural dieting or machines and pulleys that may strain your heart or other vital organs—can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN! In just a few minutes a day! Mail Coupon NOW for my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells all about *Dynamic-Tension*. Shows actual photos. It's a valuable book! And it's FREE. Send for your copy *today*. Address me personally: Charles Atlas, Dept. 9-11, 133 E. 23rd St., New York City.

FREE BOOK

CHARLES ATLAS
Holder of the title: "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" won in open competition in the only National and International Contests held during the past 15 years.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9-11,
133 East 23rd Street, New York City

I want the proof that your system of *Dynamic-Tension* will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City..... State .....

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A NEW LIFETIME BUSINESS OPENED TO EARNEST MEN

NO HIGH PRESSURE SELLING
NO HOUSE-TO-HOUSE CANVASSING

INCOME EQUAL TO REQUIREMENTS OF THE HIGH-GRADE BUSINESS MAN

E. Lawson, of Tennessee, clears **$108 profit his first 3 days** in this business. He tops off these earnings with **$113 profit on a single deal** a few days later. J. C. May, Conn., cleared $262.35 the first nine days he worked. J. E. Loomis, Oregon, earns **$245 his first 9 days.** A. W. Farnsworth, Utah, **nets $64.16 his first day,** a Saturday. S. Clair, New York, writes he is clearing as high as **$70 a day.** W. F. Main, Iowa, cleans up **$291.50 in 9 days.** B. Y. Becton, Kansas, starts out with **$530.53 net for 40 days' work!** These men are beginners. How could they enter a field totally new to them and earn such remarkable sums in these desperate times? **Read the answer in this announcement.** Read about a new business that does away with the need for high pressure selling. A rich field that is creating new money-making frontiers for wide-awake men. **Those who enter now will pioneer—to them will go the choicest opportunities.**

FOUR $15 SALES DAILY PAY $280 WEEKLY

INSTALLING NEW BUSINESS SPECIALTY ON FREE TRIAL — MAKING TREMENDOUS CASH SAVINGS IN OPERATING COSTS FOR THOUSANDS OF CONCERNS THROUGHOUT THE U. S. AND CANADA

$4,707 SAVINGS
For One Kansas Store in Two Months

Sanders Ridgeway of Kansas invests $88.60 and saves $4,707.00 between April 5th and June 29th! Bowser Lumber and Feed Co., West Virginia, **invests $15, reports savings well over $1,000.00!** Fox Ice and Coal Co., Wisconsin, saves $3,564.00! Baltimore Sporting Goods Store **invests $45, saves $1,600!** Safety Auto Lock Corporation, New York, **invests $15, saves $686.45!** With these and scores of similar results *to display, our representatives* interest every business man, from the very smallest to the very largest. No one can dispute the proof in the photo-copies of actual letters which our men show.

NO HIGH PRESSURE—SIMPLY INSTALL—SELLS ITSELF

Here is a business offering an invention so successful that we make it sell itself. Our representatives simply tell what they offer, show proof of success in every line of business and every section *of the country. Then install the specialty without a dollar down.* It starts working at once, producing a cash saving that can be counted just like the cash register money. **The customer sees with his own eyes a *big, immediate profit on his proposed investment.*** Usually he has the investment, and his profit besides, before the representative returns. The representative calls back, collects his money. OUT OF EVERY $75 BUSINESS THE REPRESENTATIVE DOES, NEARLY $60 IS HIS OWN PROFIT! THE SMALLEST HE MAKES IS $5 ON A $7.50 INSTALLATION! Our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They are getting the attention of the largest concerns in the country, and selling to the smaller *businesses by the thousands.* You can get exclusive rights. **Business is GOOD.** in this line, in small towns or big cities alike! It's on the boom now. Get in while the business is young!

COMPLETE TRAINING FURNISHED

Every man with us today started at scratch, without *previous experience, many* coming out of clerking jobs, many out of small businesses, some out of large concerns. We teach you every angle of the business. We hand you the biggest money-making business of its kind in the country. You try out this business ABSOLUTELY WITHOUT RISKING A RED COPPER CENT OF YOUR OWN. Can't possibly tell you all in the limited space available here. Mail the coupon now for full information—nothing to risk, everything to gain.

Brilliant Record of Success

America's foremost concerns are among our customers: Timken Silent Automatic Co., Central State *Petroleum Corp., Houghton Mifflin Co., National* Pape Co., International Coal, General Brake Service, National Radio, and scores of others nationally known. Thousands of small businesses everywhere, professional businesses such as schools, hospitals, infirmaries, doctors, dentists buy large installations and heavy repeat orders.

Customer Guaranteed Cash Profit

Customer gets signed certificate guaranteeing cash profit on his investment. *Very few business men are so foolish as to turn down* a proposition guaranteed to pay a profit, with proof from leading concerns that it does pay. **Protected by surety bonded national organization.**

Portfolio of References from America's Leading Concerns

is furnished you. A handsome, impressive portfolio that represents *every leading type of business* and profession. You show immediate, positive proof of success. Immediately forestalls the argument, "Doesn't fit my business." Shows that it does fit and does make good. **Closes the deal.**

Rush the Coupon for Full Information—Territory Filled in Order of Application

If you are looking for a man-size business, free from worry of other *overcrowded lines of work, get in touch with us at once.* Learn the possibilities now before the franchise for your territory is closed. This specialty is as important a business opportunity today as the typewriter, adding *machines, and dictaphone were in their early days.* Don't lose valuable time and let this slip away from you. **Use the coupon for convenience. It will bring you full information and our proposition immediately.**

MAIL FOR FULL INFORMATION!

F. E. ARMSTRONG, Pres., Dept. 4091-M, Mobile, Ala.

Without obligation to me, send me full information on your proposition.

Name .....

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F. E. ARMSTRONG, President, Dept. 4091-M, MOBILE, ALABAMA

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